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## 101 MOVIE MASTERPIECES

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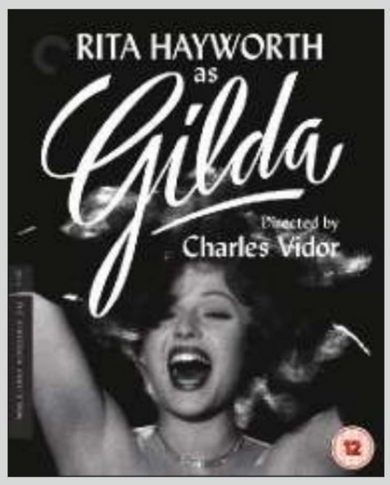
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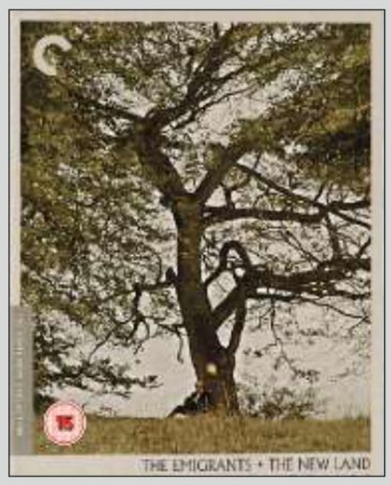












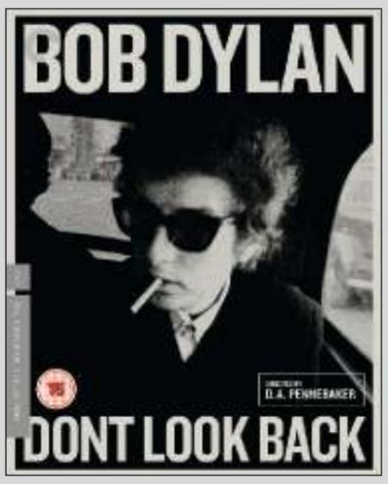


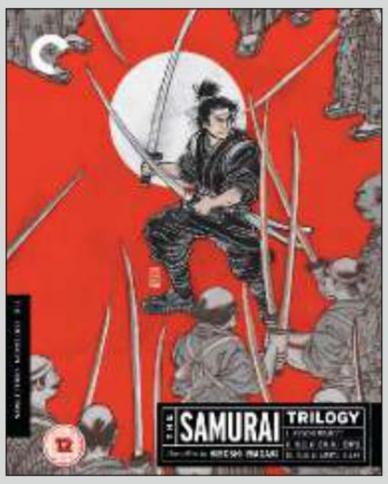


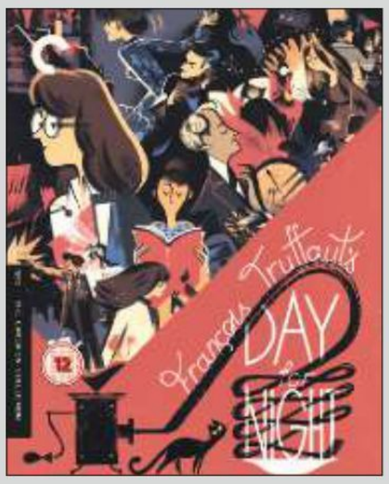
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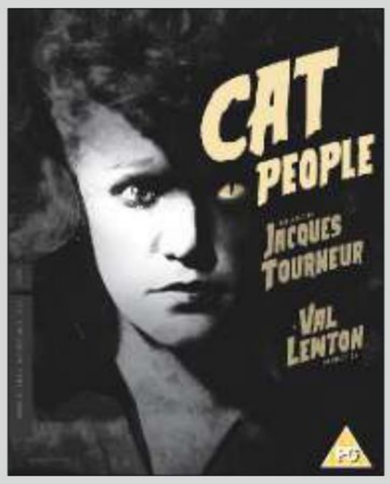
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# Ed's Letter

## 101 MOVIE MASTERPIECES

HELLO AND WELCOME to this — a very special edition of *Empire*. Since 2003 we've been writing about cinema's masterpieces. That's one (almost) every month for 13 years. (We missed six or so issues along the way — the reasons why are unclear to me.) And here are 101 of the best of them — including the *L.A. Confidential* Masterpiece from issue 303, not the one from issue 191. It's the only film to appear as an *Empire* Masterpiece twice, and there's a very good reason for it — we messed up. These things happen. And now, because of this very magazine, the issue 303 iteration has become definitive. Please destroy all other versions.

What this isn't is a definitive list of the 101 best films (obvious, because *True Romance* isn't in it). Instead this collection of film essays works as a whirlwind history of cinema, from silent movies, through the advent of colour, up to the modern classics. We begin with 1916 DW Griffith epic *Intolerance* and, via *Double Indemnity*, *To Kill A Mockingbird* and *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*, eventually end up (spoiler alert) 90 years later at 2006's *Pan's Labyrinth*. It's quite a journey.

(And if you're wondering what happened next, we'll get to some films from the past decade in the main magazine soon. Promise. *Inception*, *The Dark Knight* and *Paul Blart: Mall Cop 2* are all on the list. And, technically, 2013's *Before Midnight* has been featured, albeit as a piece about the trilogy as a whole.)

Putting this special issue together has been a joy for two main reasons. Firstly, it reminded me that *Empire* has some of the most interesting and well-informed writers in the business. I'm honoured to work with them. And also because it's prompted me to rewatch classic films I've not seen in years (*Sunset Boulevard*), or even watch for the first time masterpieces I (shamefully) hadn't got round to yet (*Lost Horizon*).

It's given me a reason to indulge my love for cinema. I hope it has a similar effect on you.



Terri.

**TERRI WHITE**
**EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**

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# THE GOLDEN AGE 1916-1960

**Silent spectacles, musicals, Westerns and noir — the grammar of cinematic narrative is written by genius pioneers**

# Intolerance

## An epic of epic epicness

**1916** /CERT **PG** /
DIRECTOR
**DW GRIFFITH** /
SCREENWRITERS
**DW GRIFFITH,**
**HETTIE GREY BAKER,**
**TOD BROWNING,**
**ANITA LOOS, MARY**
**H O'CONNOR,**
**FRANK E. WOODS** /
CAST **LILLIAN**
**GISH, DOUGLAS**
**FAIRBANKS,**
**SPOTTISWOODE**
**AITKEN**

DAVID WARK GRIFFITH, a man with a taste for the finer things in life, would have enjoyed LA's Hollywood & Highland Center. Perched on the corner of Hollywood and Sunset Boulevard, it's a mall big enough to knock the jaws off Romero's zombies, holding the Dolby Theatre, home of the Oscars, and the legendary Grauman's cinema, site of that massive explosion in *Iron Man 3*, in its opulent bowels. But it's not the Hollywood lore or retail opportunities that would catch the great film pioneer's eye, because towering incongruously over this sea of Gap and Louis Vuitton outlets is the colossal Babylonian arch he designed for *Intolerance* a century ago. Three classical columns and two squatting elephants looming over oblivious shoppers would no doubt broaden his smile of recognition.

As metaphors for Griffith's contribution to cinema go, it takes some beating. Few multiplex-goers would even recognise his name, but the man and the cinematic edifices he constructed have proved just too huge to shift, dismantle or knock over. The grandest, most ambitious of them all, *Intolerance*, followed a year after *Birth Of A Nation* had blazed a trail at the box office. That Civil War epic, a misty-eyed tribute to the Confederacy his father had fought for, had hit paydirt but its pungent racial stereotyping and Klan-worship left his reputation tarnished.

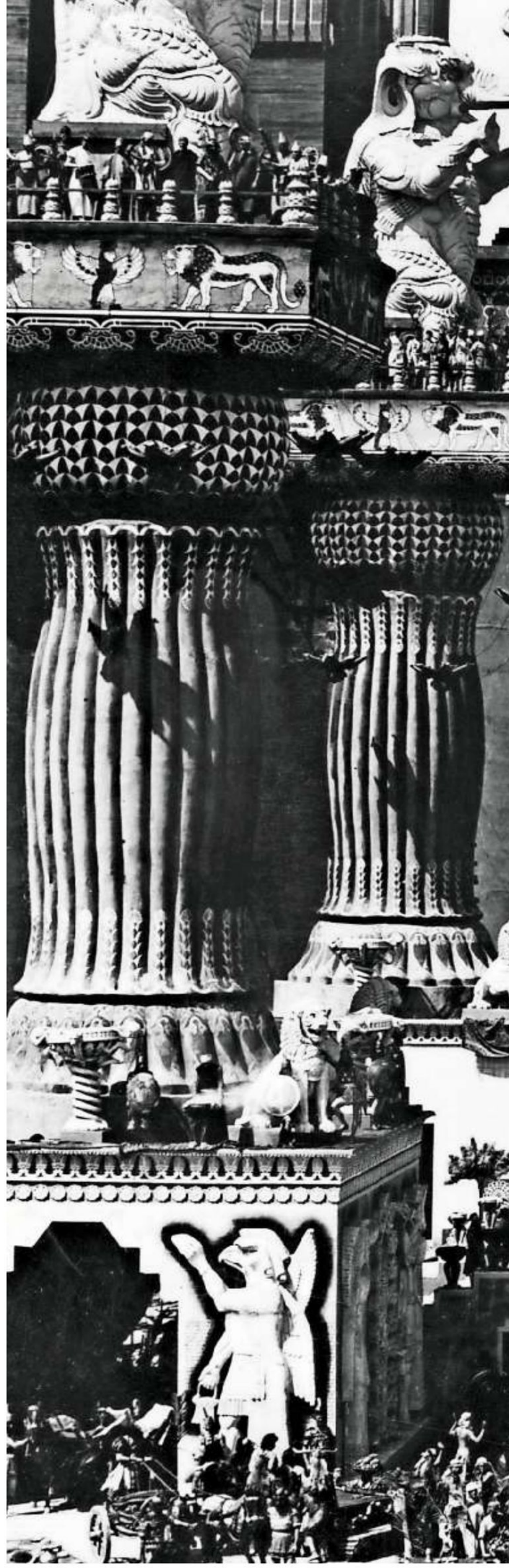
What followed, a hymn to compassion and human understanding that spans millennia, was a justification rather than an apology. Shrugging off his vociferous critics ("My picturisation of history as it happens requires no apology or defence," he grumbled in *Sight & Sound* years later) and fuelled by all the hubris $10 million can buy, Griffith set to work on his opus.

Looking back, *Intolerance*'s four-stranded narrative, linked by Lillian Gish's cradle-rocking Eternal Mother, feels like a bonkers exercise in one-upmanship with its main inspiration, Italian epic *Cabiria*. Giovanni Pastrone's 1914 silent film plays like a loinclothed blueprint for the Babylonian quarter of Griffith's story — a frenzy of pageantry, treachery and eye-popping battles. "Recreated the eruption of Etna? I'll rebuild ancient Babylon on a Hollywood backlot." "Used leopards? I'll raise you monkeys, a bunch of elephants, 3,000 extras and a tank that shoots flames." Imagine two James Camerons sharing a filmmaking landscape, each trying to out-*Avatar* the other, with a third, Cecil B DeMille, warming up his chariots in the wings, and you have a flavour of an era when if something was worth doing, it was worth doing BIG.

In a tour de force of editing that would influence *Pulp Fiction*, *Babel* and *Traffic*, among others, Griffith stitched his four stories together, accelerating the pace of his crosscutting as each raced towards its climax. It wasn't a new device — Edwin S Porter had mastered the grammar of editing with *The Great Train Robbery* 13 years previously — but the way he was using its cadence to crank up tension definitely was. The first tale, simply titled "Modern' Story', is the standout. As The Dear One (Mae Marsh) and The Boy (Robert Harron) are subjected to the indignity of poverty, the forced fostering of their baby and a harrowing race against time to save him from the gallows, cinematographer Billy Bitzer's close-ups and halo lighting gave Marsh and Harron the chance to be not just movie stars, but actors playing believable characters.

Not for nothing did the Camera Guild vote Bitzer one of its ten most influential cinematographers, alongside greats like Gordon Willis, Freddie Young and Gregg Toland. Using an improvised crane, he plucks details from the *Where's Wally?* maelstrom of Babylon, zooming in a historic single take to focus on individual supplicants marching down the city's huge staircase. Only some technical snags (and common sense) prevented the director and his DP from attempting to use a hot air balloon for that purpose. That stymied ambition was poured into a battle sequence that features full-scale siege towers, thousands of extras and that flame-tank prowling around the city walls like Smaug at Lake-town.

The public, baffled by the intricate structure and unmoved by Griffith's

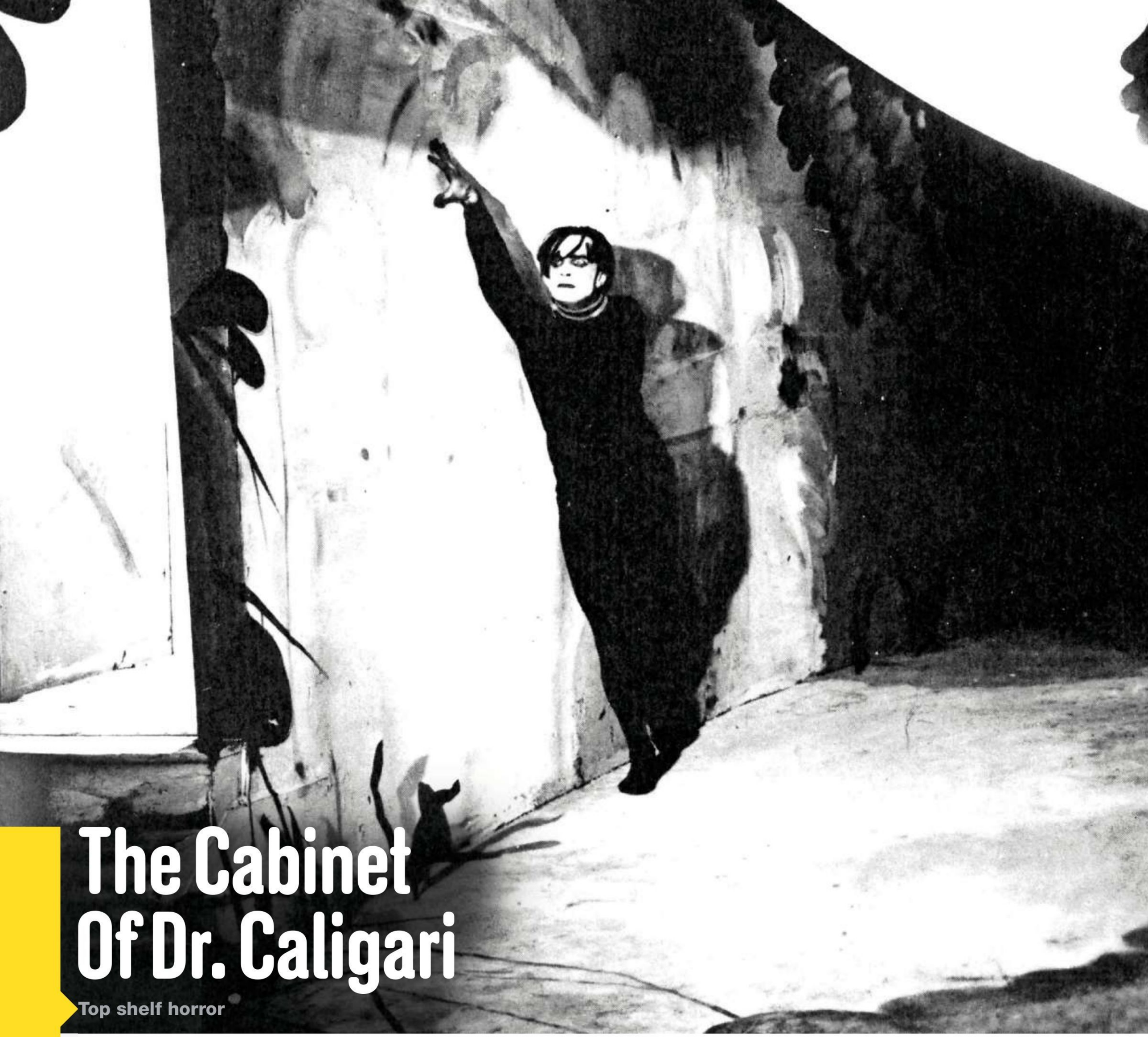


**"A HYMN TO COMPASSION AND HUMAN UNDERSTANDING THAT SPANS MILLENNIA."**

The Babylon hall set for DW Griffith's silent magnum opus was of monumental proportions.

self-consciously Important Themes, shunned the film. Critics, though, spotted something in it that would see it mature, slowly but surely, into a cinematic landmark. Life praised it for "illustrating admirably the big things the moving picture does". Other filmmakers (including *Intolerance*'s own ADs, Erich von Stroheim and Tod Browning, both soon to be influential directors in their own right) were swiftly emulating those very techniques — or, in the case of Buster Keaton's *Three Ages*, parodying them — giving Griffith enduring status as the father of modern cinema.

Received wisdom gives this chapter of film history a downbeat ending. As legend has it, the near-bankrupt Griffith eventually retired in penury and disrepute. In reality, Griffith died a reasonably wealthy man, holed up in Hollywood's Knickerbocker Hotel telling tales of the old days. According to a *Variety* obituary dated 28 July, 1948, his financial legacy tallied up to nearly $50,000. His cinematic legacy, however, was incalculable. Introducing a screening of *Intolerance* in 1971, Orson Welles, that great innovator behind *Citizen Kane* (see page 26), passed the credit on to another pioneer of the big screen. "It was immensely ambitious [of DW Griffith] to put all those stories together and make them work," Welles rumbled in his trademark baritone. "That failure remains one of the great successes in the history of the cinema." **PHIL DE SEMLYEN**



# The Cabinet Of Dr. Caligari

**Top shelf horror**

**1920** / CERT **U** / DIRECTOR **ROBERT WIENE** / SCREENWRITERS **CARL MAYER, HANS JANOWITZ** / CAST **WERNER KRAUSS, CONRAD VEIDT**

MADMEN AND MURDERERS stalk the twisted sets of horror cinema's first classic.

Without *The Cabinet Of Dr. Caligari*, there would be no Adolf Hitler. Accusations of copycat violence against *Child's Play 3* or *A Clockwork Orange* pale into insignificance beside this sweeping statement about a film made long ago in 1920. But before you dismiss it as a crackpot theory rustled up by a tabloid, note that it's at the heart of one of the most famous and controversial film theory books ever written. In 1947's *From Caligari To Hitler: A Psychological History Of German Film*, author Siegfried Kracauer argues that films such as *The Cabinet Of Dr. Caligari* reflect the moral state of Germany in the early 1920s, showing worlds of chaos that demand order imposed by strong leaders. In other words, out of the social decadence of Weimer cinema goose-stepped the Nazis.

Maybe so, but *The Cabinet Of Dr. Caligari* deserves a better epitaph than this. In visual terms alone, it is almost unique in the archives as cinema's best example of what the academics call "German Expressionism". Its influence on moody production design and twisted camera angles is incalculable, and so it is guaranteed a place in history books and film courses. However, it is much more than a museum piece for film buffs — it's a cracking psychological thriller carried off with a bold, unsettling flourish. In fact, it's the first horror film of quality to be made anywhere in the world. Murder, madness, a zombie-like sleepwalker, a power-crazed scientist: this film has got the lot.

The story opens just after a fair has come to the town of Holstenwall. Francis (Friedrich Feher) and his friend Alan (Hans Heinrich von Twardowski) are intrigued by carnival showman Caligari (Werner Krauss), who keeps a "somnambulist" called Cesare (Conrad Veidt) in a cabinet that's more like an upright coffin. In his sleeping state, Cesare can predict the future, and tells Alan that he will die by dawn. And indeed he does, as Caligari is



"Sonambulist" Cesare (Conrad Veidt) explores the Expressionist space.

manipulating his living doll to murder the townsfolk. Francis casts himself as detective, trying to solve the mystery. Gatecrashing the local asylum, he discovers its director is really Caligari in disguise. But wait — that's not all. In a wraparound twist, we realise that Francis is actually an inmate of the asylum. He has made it all up. This is literally a tale told by a madman.

*The Cabinet Of Dr. Caligari*'s surprise coda has been the subject of controversy for decades. The film's writers, Carl Mayer and Hans Janowitz, argue that, without the twist, their original vision was a subversive attack on Germany's authoritarian leaders (Caligari) who sent the country's youth (Cesare) to the trenches of World War I. It seems that the wraparound story was added by producer Erich Pommer and director Robert Wiene, either for purely commercial reasons — it's a great narrative coup — or because Wiene felt a personal attachment to the story because his own father had gone insane late in life.

To the average viewer, none of this matters a jot. As a slap-in-the-face ending, Caligari is up there with *Brazil*, *The Usual Suspects* and *The Sixth Sense*.

On another level, this twist is actually bound together with the film's visual style. Think, for example, of Edvard Munch's painting *The Scream*, which long ago crossed over from high art into pop culture. Ripped off for the mask of a ghost-faced killer by Wes Craven and perpetually used as a commercial marketing gimmick, it's as familiar an image as the *Mona Lisa*. But look again at the original painting: a skeletal figure on a bridge surrounded by ripples in the air, inner anguish radiating out into the external world. Munch's masterpiece is a precursor to Expressionism, an avant-garde movement which wound its way from painting to theatre, literature and architecture, and then to cinema during the first decades of the 20th century. Germany was its stronghold, and *The Cabinet Of Dr. Caligari* is its greatest achievement.

*The Scream* echoes off the walls in this film. At one point, a canvas poster of a gaunt figure stands outside a carnival tent, its *Scream*-like features advertising the freak-show promised within. More importantly, the filmmakers adopt a similar visual technique to that of Munch's painting. The film's design — the sets, the street scenes, the costumes, the make-up, the inter-titles, as well as certain performances — exists in order to express one character's disturbed emotions through distortions in the real world. Sunlight and shadow are painted directly onto the floors and walls. Doors and windows lean at crazy angles in buildings made up of sharp edges and jagged corners. Pointed rooftops bend inwards, encircling the characters like the jaws of a wild animal. It's a threatening, paranoid environment.

The film premiered at the Marmorhaus Cinema in Berlin on 26 February, 1920, and was an instant sensation, its influence on silent German cinema immediately apparent. Generally speaking, Expressionism was a reaction against Realism in art, including the young medium of film which, until then, had aimed to copy the real world through the camera lens. *Caligari*, on the other hand, brought a highly stylised art sensibility into a populist entertainment environment. In Germany this led to a series of fantasy, horror and science-fiction films that remain classics to this day, including *Nosferatu*, *Faust* and *Metropolis*. When exported to foreign markets, *Caligari* proved no less popular or influential — think of James Whale's *Frankenstein*, the mood of film noir, the Hollywood films of Fritz Lang and the early British films of Alfred Hitchcock. Indeed, even today, Expressionism isn't such a remote concept. It's there in almost every frame devised by Tim Burton. As a style, it's the perfect fusion of character and environment — hence the shadows, rain and squalor of the crime scenes of *Seven*.

**"OUT OF THE DECADENCE OF WEIMAR CINEMA GOOSE-STEPPED THE NAZIS AND ADOLF HITLER."**

*The Cabinet Of Dr. Caligari* lives on in cinema legend. The career of Robert Wiene did not. After a few more attempts to bring Expressionism to the big screen he disappeared from view. However, Conrad Veldt, who played Cesare, became one of Germany's most famous silent stars; then, when he fled Hitler, he found a niche playing villains and, ironically, Nazis in the likes of *Casablanca* (1942).

In 1922, censors considered banning *Caligari* outright, in case it upset viewers with relatives in insane asylums. This seems a petty quibble about the film that would later be blamed for aiding the rise of Adolf Hitler. Just goes to show that horror movies have always born the brunt of condemnation — including the one that got the entire genre rolling. **ALAN MORRISON**

# The Thief Of Bagdad

## The original prince of Persia

**1924** / CERT **U** / DIRECTOR **RAOUL WALSH** / SCREENWRITERS **LOTTA WOODS, DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS** / CAST **DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS, JULANNE JOHNSTON, SNITZ EDWARDS**

AWE-INSPIRING THOUGH it is, DW Griffith's Great Wall Of Babylon set in *Intolerance* (see page 10) was not the largest of the silent era. That distinction goes to the medieval castle constructed for 1922's *Robin Hood*, starring Douglas Fairbanks. Covering four hectares and employing most of Los Angeles' casual labour force for months, it was the largest single structure ever built for a movie, a soaring monument to Fairbanks' colossal stardom.

With his devilish good looks, deft comic touch and supreme athleticism, Fairbanks is a hard act to upstage. But the production design of his biggest films — *Robin Hood, The Mark Of Zorro* — comes close. And none of them, not even King John's castle, comes as close as the dazzling Arabian fantasy Fairbanks conjured into being for 1924's *The Thief Of Bagdad*. The sets, a dreamscape of minarets, domes, shady courtyards, bustling bazaars and sumptuous palaces, were designed, under Fairbanks' close supervision, by art director William Cameron Menzies, who later acted as production designer (a term he created) on *Gone With The Wind*. It's the archetypal make-believe vision of the Orient, the sublime inspiration for every panto production of *Ali Baba* ever since. It occupied six acres and was constructed with a polished enamel floor lit from the base of the buildings to give the impression that the city floated on air.

Made at a cost of around $1.2 million, *The Thief Of Bagdad* was one of the most expensive pictures of its era. And most of what wasn't lavished on the sets was spent on the state-of-the-art special effects. Spoilt (so to speak) as we are by CGI, it's invariably in this area that old movies fall down. But here, even for the time, the effects are marvellous and so groundbreaking they were the subject of a feature in the magazine *Science And Invention*. Outstanding moments include Fairbanks venturing into the undersea mermaid kingdom (an effect created by shooting through thin gauze and then tinting the footage blue in post-production); a stop-motion flying horse; a magic rope, and the final scene of Fairbanks and co-star Julanne Johnston sweeping over the rooftops on a flying carpet. This was achieved without camera tricks or stunt doubles; the carpet rested on a 19mm sheet of steel suspended from a 30m construction crane by 16 piano wires, each the thickness of a pencil lead.

Despite all this, the magnificent sets, the pioneering special effects, the real star of the show is Fairbanks himself. Playing a loveable rogue (his favourite on-screen persona), a Bazaar pickpocket involved in a convoluted, picaresque plot to win the hand of a beautiful princess (Johnston), he is debonair personified, a swagger in his step, a twinkle in his eye and a tongue lodged firmly in his cheek. It's this ability to be utterly heroic while not taking himself remotely seriously that accounts for Fairbanks' charm. What also makes Fairbanks endlessly watchable is his prowess as a gymnast. He was the founder of the chandelier-swinging school of movie stunts and is in unparalleled form here, scaling high walls, bounding from balcony-to-balcony, shimmying up draperies and, in one famous scene, jumping in and out of giant clay pots in the marketplace. The "jack-in-the-box" effect was created by placing a miniature trampoline inside each pot. The stunt coordinator on the film was the legendary Coy Watson, who perfected his craft at Mack Sennett's Keystone Studios, and the entire set was meticulously designed to make Fairbanks' athletic exploits look effortless — walls were of a certain height, windows were spaced accordingly, tables the optimum width for diving over.

*Bagdad*'s credited director is Raoul Walsh, but it is a Douglas Fairbanks production. As writer, producer and star he applied his eye for detail to every aspect of it, demanding the highest standards in all departments. Watching it now gives the lie again to any notion that silent films were in some way primitive. *The Thief Of Bagdad* represents pre-talkies Hollywood at its zenith: a thrilling and beautiful work of art. **SIMON BRAUND**

**"IT'S THE ARCHETYPAL MAKE-BELIEVE VISION OF THE ORIENT."**



Daredevils Douglas Fairbanks and Julanne Johnston ride the magic carpet suspended by piano wire.



Peter Lorre provides a genial face of evil in Fritz Lang's confounding moral fable.

# M

## Justice on the Fritz

**1931** / CERT **PG** / DIRECTOR **FRITZ LANG** / SCREENWRITERS **FRITZ LANG, THEA VON HARBOU** / CAST **PETER LORRE, ELLEN WIDMANN**

FEW SCENES IN the history of cinema convey as much dread and foreboding as one near the beginning of Fritz Lang's *M*. It depicts a stray ball, rolling away unheeded across a patch of waste ground; high above, a toy balloon strains weakly to free itself from the telephone wires. A child killer has claimed another victim.

There are no scenes of violence in Lang's early sound masterpiece, certainly none involving children. And yet watching it, even at more than eight decades' remove, is a chilling experience. It's neither a conventional thriller nor a whodunnit, but a meticulously researched, unsparingly honest study of evil.

Starring Peter Lorre as the killer, stalking the streets of Berlin, the eerie whistle of *In The Hall Of The Mountain King* announcing his presence, the film was written by Lang's wife, Thea von Harbou, her inspiration said to be the 1920s killing spree of Peter Kürten — the so-called Vampire Of Düsseldorf — who was executed by guillotine the year of *M*'s release (Lang denied this, convincing few). Not only did Thea von Harbou, whose work went uncredited, scour newspaper articles for information, she collaborated with the Berlin police, who gave her unprecedented access to classified reports. For his part, Lang conducted interviews with jailed sex offenders, detectives at Scotland Yard and spent time at a mental institution.

The narrative turns on the grisly exploits of Hans Beckert (Lorre, in his first leading role), a serial killer whose crimes give rise to a sweeping yet futile police operation. So exhaustive is the manhunt that it begins to disrupt the activities of the "legitimate" underworld who, for strictly business reasons, instigate their own search for Beckert. (In the name of authenticity, Lang cast real underworld figures, 24 of whom were arrested during filming.) The criminals prove more effective than the cops, and Beckert is run to earth in a city office block. He is then, in one of the film's most famous scenes, taken to an abandoned distillery and thrown down the steps of a cellar where, his face a mask of horror, he turns to face his accusers. The events that follow are extraordinary. The criminals do not immediately mete out the swift, terrible justice that we, the audience, and Beckert himself are expecting. Instead they subject him to a kangaroo court with a "lawyer" appointed to argue his case before a "judge", the silent mob standing by as jury. At one stage, he is permitted to speak in his own defence. In the course of an impassioned speech, brilliantly delivered by Lorre, who manages to make Beckert both loathsome and pitiable, he claims that he has no control over the urges that compel him to kill, whereas they, many of whom are guilty of murder, commit crimes with a free will. It's a moral dilemma that could not possibly have been addressed in a Hollywood movie of the period.

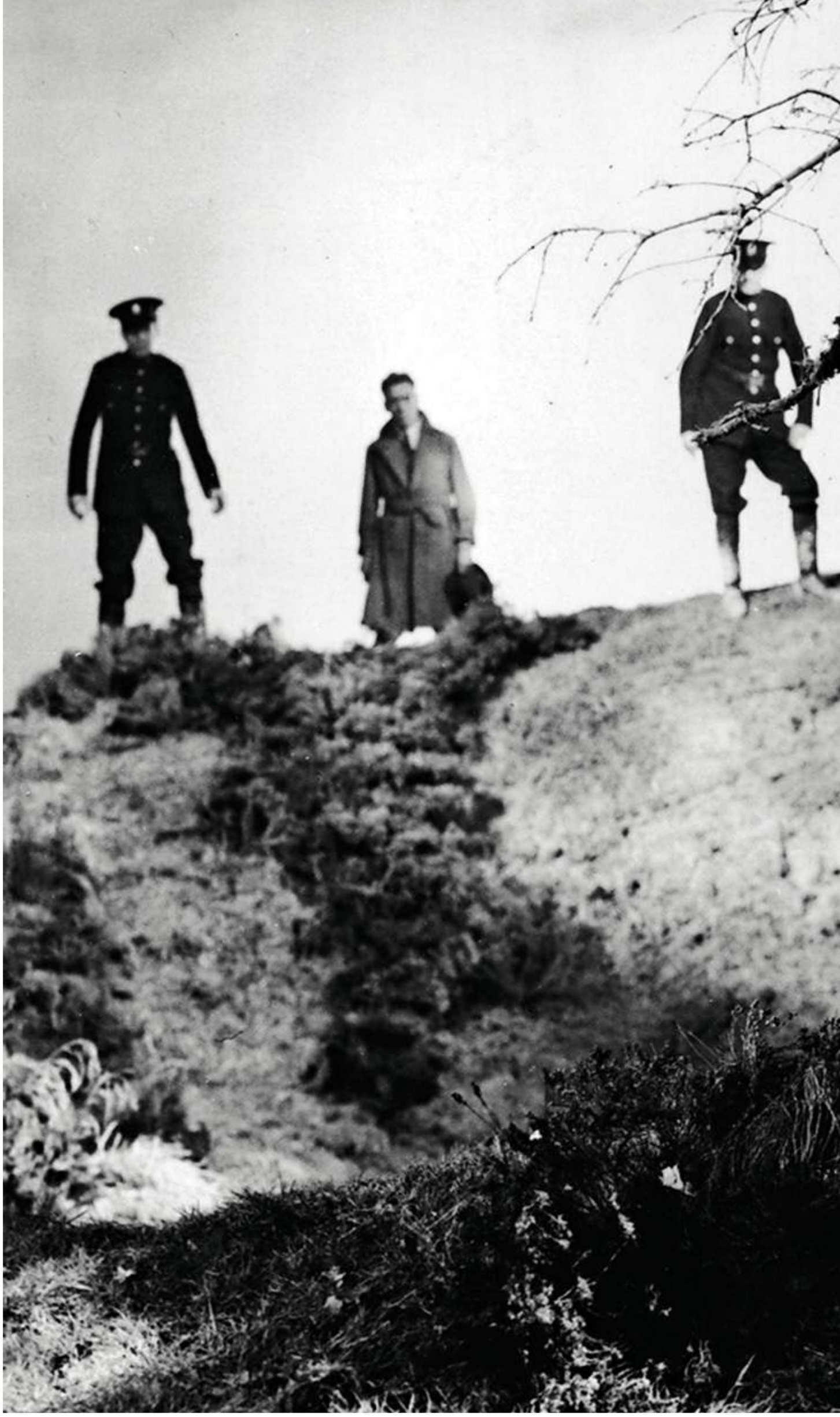
Much to Lang's disgust, Joseph Goebbels, the Nazis' Minister Of Propaganda, was a big fan, describing the film as "fantastic, free of phony humanitarian sentiments". Several years later Lang was summoned to a meeting by Goebbels, who informed him that although his 1932 film *The Testament Of Dr. Mabuse* was going to be banned, he admired Lang as a filmmaker so much he was offering him the position of head of UFA, the studio at the hub of the German film industry and an integral part of the Nazi propaganda machine.

According to Lang, it was during this meeting with Goebbels that he determined to leave the country. With his marriage to von Harbou over — she had herself become a Party supporter — he fled to Paris in 1934. Shortly afterwards, he arrived in Hollywood. His first American film was 1936's *Fury*, a scathing indictment of mob mentality. Lang's subsequent career was marked with many high points — *Ministry Of Fear*, *The Woman In The Window*, *The Big Heat* — but his febrile imagination was never again given as free a rein as it had enjoyed with *M*, the film he considered his finest work. **SIMON BRAUND**

# The 39 Steps

## The trouble with Hannay

**1935** / CERT **U** / DIRECTOR **ALFRED HITCHCOCK** / SCREENWRITERS **CHARLES BENNETT, IAN HAY** / CAST **ROBERT DONAT, MADELEINE CARROLL, LUCIE MANNHEIM**



DEDICATING HIS 1915 novel *The Thirty-Nine Steps* to a friend, author John Buchan described it as his attempt at what he called "the 'shocker'... the romance where the incidents defy the probabilities, and march just inside the borders of the possible". Buchan's words are accurate enough, but applied to the career of the man who would transform his story from ripping yarn to cinematic benchmark, they're downright uncanny.

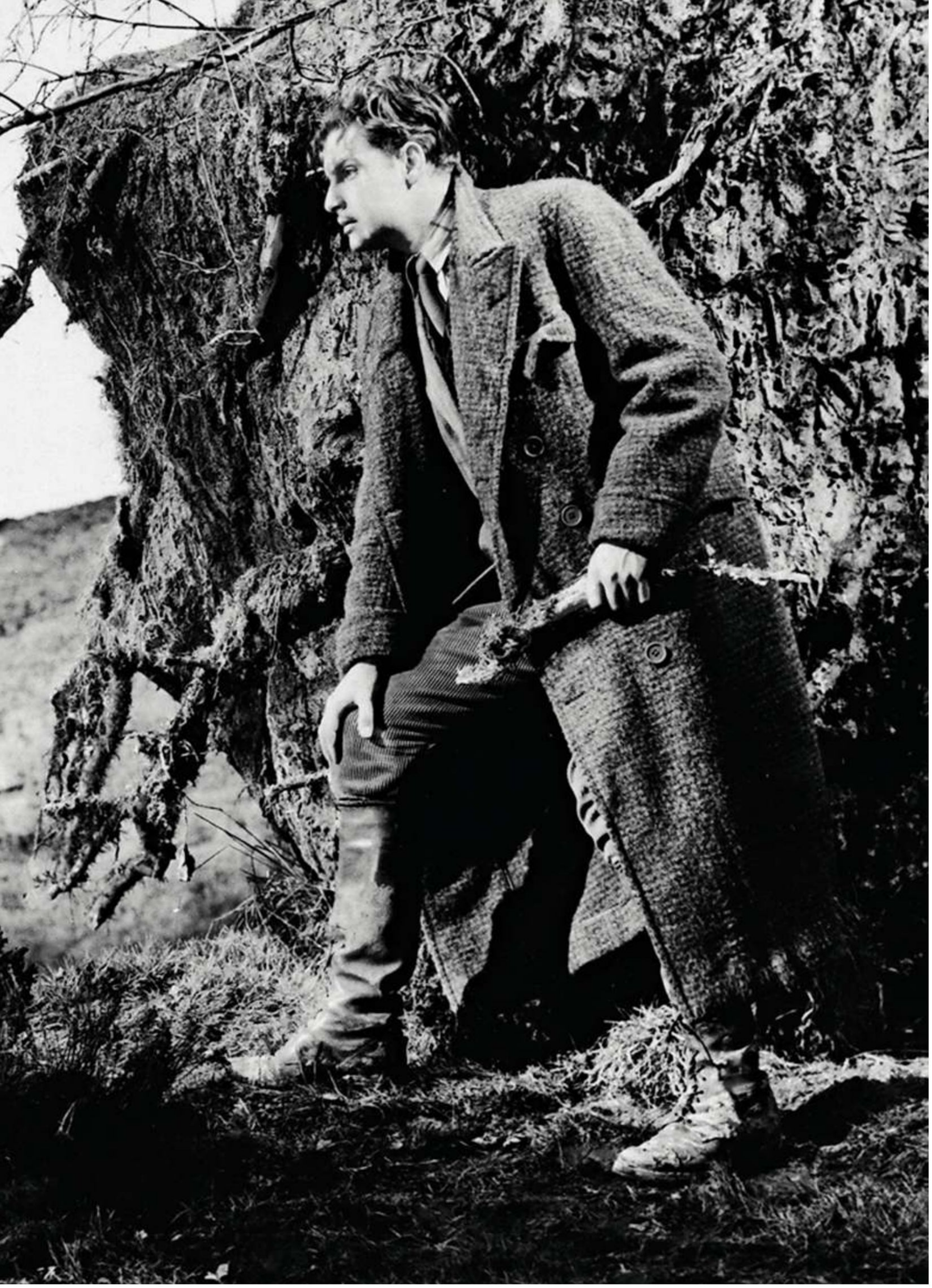
Alfred Hitchcock would later tell François Truffaut, in their famous interviews, that he was drawn to *The Thirty-Nine Steps* by his "respect for a literary masterpiece". However, Hitch also told Truffaut that he'd "read a story only once, and if I like the basic idea, I just forget all about the book and start to create cinema". Which is just what happened when he replaced the majority of Buchan's tale with new ideas for his 1935 film. Makes you wonder how he'd have treated a literary masterpiece he didn't respect.

In fairness to Hitchcock, his version blows Buchan's out of the water — leaner, richer, funnier and cleverer. And such was his disregard for Buchan's plotting that he even altered the title (to the visually snappier, easier-to-market *The 39 Steps*) and its meaning: the book's rather prosaic staircase, which signposts the villains' hideout, was swapped for the film's MacGuffin, a spy ring leaching British defence secrets to shifty foreign powers. Considering Hitchcock's fascination with steps and stairs in later films like *Suspicion* (1941), *Vertigo* (1958), *Psycho* (1960) and *Frenzy* (1972), there's an irony in his ditching of a potentially fertile motif at this stage in his career.

Nevertheless, *The 39 Steps* is a grab-bag of Hitchcockian goodies, from its innocent-man-on-the-run premise to pitch-perfect grace notes like the charlady's scream that mutates into a train whistle, negating pages of exposition. It's easy to posit the film — the director's 18th completed feature — as the point at which his distinctive style coalesced and the auteur was born. But to do so is to fall into the director's own carefully devised trap and ignore the work of *The 39 Steps*' team of writers, not least a man whose name remains largely unfamiliar to the casual viewer: Charles Bennett.

Hitchcock's collaborators often found themselves casualties of his quest to cultivate his own brand, and Hitch mythology is littered with the unmarked graves of hundreds of talented individuals' egos. Charles Bennett was merely one of the first victims, but his role in shaping the Hitchcock legend can't be underestimated: after a short stint as a playwright (he wrote *Blackmail* for the stage, which Hitchcock adapted as his first talkie in 1929), Bennett co-wrote a clutch of Hitch's British pictures during a purple patch which

**"A CINEMATIC BENCHMARK... THE FILM'S LEGACY IS IMPOSSIBLE TO EXAGGERATE."**



Richard Hannay (Richard Donat) on the run in *The 39 Steps*.

would ignite the director's talent for twisty, blackly comic thrillers and give his flagging career a vital shot in the arm.

*The 39 Steps* was their second writing collaboration; the first, the previous year's *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, is a similarly taut 'shocker' unfairly overshadowed by Hitchcock's own star-studded 1956 remake. The two men worked quickly on their screenplays, usually at the director's Kensington flat (and, legend has it, on exclusive steamboat cruises up and down the Thames at Hitchcock's expense) alongside a handful of even less well-recognised contributors, including Hitch's wife Alma.

Together they bashed their ideas for *The 39 Steps* into a flawlessly streamlined script, an episodic odyssey which sees bored bachelor Richard Hannay (Robert Donat, or 'Mr Doughnut' to Hitch) forced to evade the police and the titular bad guys when a foreign agent is murdered in his London flat. Fleeing to rural Scotland with valuable information, Hannay is bounced from one adventure to the next like an immaculately moustachioed pinball.

Hitchcock envisaged each scene as "a little film in itself", but Bennett would claim ownership of the plot's tight construction; as it swings from tragedy (a touching encounter with a literally life-saving woman and her abusive husband) to comedy (Hannay stumbles into a political rally and finds himself the keynote speaker) with effortless economy, the audience is barely given time to catch their breath.

The complex gender dynamics and sexual politics for which Hitchcock's films would become legendary can also be traced back to his collaborations with Bennett: see *The 39 Steps*' cynical attitude to marriage. The image of Hannay unwillingly handcuffed to Madeleine Carroll's reluctant heroine Pamela is only the most indelible of these, and such was the effect of its conception and execution that many erroneously recall the pair being manacled to each other for most of the film, rather than the mere 14 minutes they actually are.

The film's legacy is impossible to exaggerate: not only would Hitchcock recycle elements in future thrillers (1942's *Saboteur* is a virtual remake; 1959's *North By Northwest* the big-budget apotheosis of the template), but echoes can be felt in the rest of pop-culture cinema. Both James Bond and Indiana Jones would be introduced to audiences via a series of abstract close-ups, as Richard Hannay is here, and Bond fans will recognise everything from the disfigured villain to the escape from London to the Scottish Highlands as shared ingredients. Little must Charles Bennett have realised the impact he and Hitchcock would still have on an entire industry 80 years later.

It's worth noting that Hitchcock deigned to share his obligatory cameo with Bennett in *The 39 Steps*. As Richard Hannay agrees to shelter the doomed spy with the portentous warning that, "It's your funeral," the two men stroll through the frame, Hitch tossing aside litter in the casual manner with which he would shortly dispose of a key character. Bennett, further from the camera, is all but obscured by the director's not inconsiderable profile, cast into his shadow. It would not be the last time. **NEIL ALCOCK**

# Top Hat

## Hot tap

**1935 / CERT U /**
DIRECTOR
**MARK SANDRICH /**
SCREENWRITERS
**DWIGHT TAYLOR,**
**ALLAN SCOTT /**
CAST **FRED ASTAIRE,**
**GINGER ROGERS**

*TOP HAT*'S WINNING combination of sparkling wit and unforgettable song-and-dance routines virtually ensured not only the immortality of the musical in popular culture, but also that the hosts of *Strictly Come Dancing* would have jobs nearly 80 years later.

Despite all that is right with *Top Hat*'s script and music, they would be nothing without the incandescent partnership at the film's heart. Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers had made three films together in the previous two years, but this would be the first written specifically to take full advantage of their unique chemistry. Irving Berlin's enduring score, and a screenplay crackling with zingers, could not have been delivered to the world by a classier act than the artists formerly known as Frederic Austerlitz and Virginia McMath.

The plot is weapons-grade farce: a tale of mistaken identity stretched to breaking point by a pile-up of improbable convolutions. Jerry Travers (Astaire) is a dancer who falls for Dale Tremont (Rogers), a model who welcomes his advances until she comes to believe, incorrectly, that he is the husband of her delightfully caustic best friend, Madge (Helen Broderick). Assuming Jerry to be a philanderer, Dale shuns, slaps and sasses him from London to Venice, where further complications arise thanks to Madge's genuinely cheating hubby, his petulant valet and a fashion designer charged at maximum camp.

So far, so screwball, but *Top Hat*'s trump card is that this web of machinations is supported by a series of near-perfect dances from the film's preternaturally talented leads. Pre-Fred and Ginger, synchronised singing and dancing on screen were largely hamstrung by technical limitations. Busby Berkeley introduced spectacle in the early '30s with complex, kaleidoscopic routines shot from above, but rarely did these displays do much to move a story forwards. When Astaire made the transition from stage to screen, he insisted dancers should be shown in full long shot without cutaways to close-ups of feet, and that dances should be shot in as few takes as possible. Crucially, he — and collaborator Hermes Pan — would also choreograph each dance as integral to the story: witness Dale's gradual capitulation to Jerry's flirting during *Top Hat*'s *Isn't This A Lovely Day (To Be Caught In The Rain)?*.

Astaire's genius is in *Top Hat*'s first number, *No Strings (I'm Fancy Free)*. It's a footloose representation of his character's happy-go-lucky outlook on life: tap-dancing in a hotel room with wild abandon and a bachelor's disregard for the wellbeing of the furniture, he makes such a racket that he wakes up

the occupant of the room below (an impossibly beautiful Rogers, immaculately made-up despite being woken in the middle of the night). The dance is all the exposition Jerry needs, and it brings the leads together with an efficiency which immediately sets up infatuation and antagonism. It's also a great tune.

The quality of the dancing is equalled by the watertight script: every apparently innocuous line is a set-up for a later gag or plot twist, and Fred and Ginger play it to absolute perfection. Their reputations as gifted dancers often obscure the fact that they were charming actors too, although it's clear which particular skill was regarded more highly by studio RKO: Astaire, the better dancer of the two, earned $40,000 for *Top Hat*, while Rogers, the more talented comic performer, pocketed a mere $7,000.

While salary discrepancies make for great scuttlebutt, gossip columnists must have been permanently frustrated that Fred and Ginger were neither at it like rabbits nor at each other's throats. The height of any acrimony came during the filming of *Top Hat*'s climactic *Cheek To Cheek* dance, in which Jerry must seduce Dale all over again. Wearing a self-designed dress festooned with ostrich feathers, Rogers drove Astaire to distraction as the dress shed itself all over him. He may have ungraciously described her look as "a chicken attacked by a coyote", but the effect on screen is dazzling: the feathers take on the appearance of flames of desire, alternately ignited and doused by Dale's confused feelings for Jerry.

As the US clawed its way out of the Depression, escapist fantasies about tuxedoed icons finding love via the medium of rhythmically stamping on the ground a lot became the drug of choice for movie audiences. Fred and Ginger's films for RKO from *Top Hat* onwards turned out to be bacon-savers for the ailing studio.

More than that, though, *Top Hat*'s popularity led to six more pairings for the divine duo, and became an inspiration for future legends. Gene Kelly claimed, without exaggeration, that "the history of dance on film begins with Astaire". That legacy can be traced through the likes of *The Red Shoes*, Kelly's own *Singin' In The Rain*, *Grease*, *Dirty Dancing*, the *High School Musical*s and *Strictly Ballroom*. In fact, anything you care to mention in which people seem to find the happiness they seek, when they're out together dancing cheek to cheek. **NEIL ALCOCK**

## "A WINNING COMBINATION OF SPARKLING WIT AND UNFORGETTABLE ROUTINES."

# Lost Horizon

## Epic Himalayan flop shows enduring grace and beauty

**1937** / CERT **U** /
DIRECTOR
**FRANK CAPRA** /
SCREENWRITER
**ROBERT RISKIN** /
CAST **RONALD**
**COLMAN,**
**JANE WYATT**

FRANK CAPRA MIGHT have become one of the most popular movie directors in Hollywood history, purveyor of 'Capra Corn' to the grateful masses, but towards the end of 1936 he was certainly the least popular person on the Columbia lot. His gargantuan production, *Lost Horizon*, was over budget and over schedule, and was sucking funds out of the studio coffers at an alarming rate. There were the sets for a start, the Himalayan landscapes and crashed plane created in a Los Angeles Cold Storage Company warehouse augmenting the original documentary footage of the Himalayas. But most of all there was the gargantuan lamasery set, the single largest standing set ever erected and, at a price-tag of $250,000, the cost of a couple of Columbia's quickies. Midway through the shoot the crew were gathered together on one of the lot's few soundstages not occupied by the movie's vast sets and informed that they would have to forgo that week's pay while the studio scrambled for ready cash. Building paradise, it seemed, came at a price.

It may seem surprising to many that cinema's most famous rendering of earthly perfection began its life in the distinctly earthy northern English town of Wigan. Native James Hilton, a journalist turned novelist whose *Goodbye Mr. Chips* would become MGM's smash of 1939, published *Lost Horizon* in 1933 to instant acclaim. Its atmospheric story involves a British diplomat, Conway, who after his plane crash-lands finds himself ensconced in a lamasery high in the Himalayas, an apparent earthly paradise presided over by a 200-year-old chief monk. The



Jane Wyatt and Ronald Coleman enjoy paradise on Frank Capra's $250,000 lamasery set.

narrative blended a new-found interest in Utopian tales — which seemed to be in the air in those inter-war years. You can detect them in movies as diverse as *The Wizard Of Oz* and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* — with the exoticism of the East, the remotest parts of which were in the process of being opened up by explorers such as Harrison Forman, whose *Through Forbidden Tibet* was a minor publishing hit, and who acted as an advisor to Capra. The novel was no less of a success in the US, where it attracted the attention of Capra, then Columbia's resident wunderkind, who, having bought a copy while prepping *Mr. Deeds Goes To Town*, devoured it in one sitting, and that night dreamt of its vividly sketched, haunting story of paradise gained and then lost. The next day he pitched it to legendary studio head Harry Cohn.

Cohn was in fact legendary for his stinginess, his epic vulgarity and his enthusiasm for making enemies. The stories are legion and well-burnished: famously a screenwriter remarked on the vast crowds assembled at his funeral, "It's proof of the old Hollywood adage, give the people what they want and they will come"; when his rabbi was asked if he could say anything nice about Cohn, he pondered before replying, "Well, he's dead." But he had built Columbia from a struggling 'Gower Gulch' operation to one of the mini-majors at least partly on the back of Capra, who with populist movies such as *Platinum Blonde* (1931) and *It Happened One Night* (1934) had tapped into post-Depression America's need for upbeat, reassuring cinema. Capra's success, together with his obvious enthusiasm for the project, convinced Cohn to greenlight it — a decision, given the movie's production snafus and lacklustre box-office performance, he would later regret, and which would permanently sour relations between the two men.

**"CAPRA CALLED CUT 34 DAYS LATE AND A MILLION DOLLARS OVER BUDGET."**

The trouble in paradise continued after Capra had finally called cut for the final time, 34 days late and nearly a million dollars over budget. A first assemblage ran for six hours, which Capra hacked down to three-and-a-half. Cohn, who famously judged films by his famous "fanny test" (if he found himself wriggling in his seat he reached for the scissors — "Imagine, the whole industry's wired to Harry Cohn's ass," was one editor's acid summation of the situation), was unamused and seized editing duties from his director, a move which led Capra to sue Cohn. Numerous cuts later the film finally went on general release to muted critical acclaim and disappointing receipts. Two further versions were released; the last, in 1952, had a running time of just 95 minutes. Though since restored to its 132-minute version, seven minutes of footage remain missing (though the soundtrack is complete). The delicious irony for modern audiences is that a movie about a lost paradise, never to be regained, is itself, in its full form at least, tantalisingly out of our reach.

Seen today, *Lost Horizon* reveals itself as a strange, beguiling gem of a film, though one with flaws as gaping as its spectacularly realised Himalayan crevasses. The most obvious complaint — that Utopia by definition is without conflict and, therefore, drama — is well taken. And Capra does himself no favours by opening with an expertly directed action sequence in which Conway and his companions, after surviving a Chinese uprising, are kidnapped, crash-land in the Himalayas and are marched over the mountains, throwing the languid pace of the rest of the story into sharp relief. But Ronald Colman is peppy and energetic as the British diplomat with Zen yearnings, Sam Jaffe (hiding behind half a ton of make-up) is suitably ethereal as the ancient High Lama, and production designer Cary Odell's lamasery set is elegant and timeless (despite its then criticised modernist influences).

And despite its failings, and the initial unenthusiastic response at the box office, *Lost Horizon*'s central spell continues to permeate the culture and exercise its strange, hypnotic charm. Hilton's phrase entered the lexicon as shorthand for a place of unattainable perfection and happiness — call it Shangri-La, call it Oz, call it Pandora, in times of trouble movie audiences yearn for the power of cinema to transport them to better, more perfect, less painful worlds. Which leaves *Lost Horizon*'s opening legend — "In these days of wars and rumours of wars, haven't you ever dreamed of a place where there was peace and security, where living was not a struggle but a lasting delight?" — as seductive in 2016 as it was nearly 80 years ago. **ADAM SMITH**

# Stagecoach

## Ford, Wayne and Monument Valley shine in this iconic Western

**1939** / CERT **U** / DIRECTOR **JOHN FORD** / SCREENWRITER **DUDLEY NICHOLS** / CAST **JOHN WAYNE, CLAIRE TREVOR**

*STAGECOACH* IS ABOUT as linear as adventures come. Based on a pulp-magazine story by Ernest Haycox (there are some claims that it was based on Guy de Maupassant's *Boule de Suif*, but they're probably nonsense), the film's task is to get a coach-full of travellers from Tonto, Arizona, through dangerous Apache territory to Lordsburg, New Mexico. Each of the passengers has their reasons for the trip. The Ringo Kid (John Wayne) is hunting down The Plummer Boys. The uptight (and, it turns out, heavily pregnant) Lucy Mallory (Louise Platt) is travelling to meet her husband and his cavalry regiment, while dashing gambler Hatfield (John Carradine) has taken it upon himself to protect her on the trip. Marshal Curly Wilcox is trying to escort the escaped Ringo back to jail, and crooked bank manager Henry Gatewood (Berton Churchill) is absconding with the proceeds of a robbery. "Proud lawified dregs" drunkard Doc Boone (Thomas Mitchell, who won an Oscar) and hooker Dallas (Claire Trevor, with top billing) are being kicked out of Tonto by the hatchet-faced Law And Order League, and Boone's new best friend, whiskey salesman Samuel Peacock (Donald Meek), whose name nobody ever remembers correctly, is on business. And Andy Devine's Buck is the hapless driver, trying to make enough cash to eat more than dreaded "beans beans beans" for a change.

But for all its narrative straightforwardness, *Stagecoach* is impressive for what it represents. It wasn't John Ford's first Western, by a long shot. That was *The Tornado* in 1917 and was followed by dozens of two-reelers and features. Neither was it John Wayne's first. The former Mr Marion Mitchell Morrison had been propping up the B-movie Western industry for a decade already, from the big-budget flop *The Big Trail* to Desolation Row quickies such as *Ride Him Cowboy* and the *Three Mesquiteers* series. It wasn't even the first time Wayne acted in a Ford film: he'd appeared unbilled in several of the director's movies (submarine drama *Men Without Women*; football flick *Salute*) in the late 1920s and 1930.

But *Stagecoach* is, nevertheless, a film of beginnings. It was Ford's first Western for 13 years, and his first with sound. It was the first Western he made with Wayne, "introducing" the star with a rack-in that's so dramatic it goes out of focus (the technology that would allow the trademark Sam Raimi crash-zoom was years away). And it's the first of his iconic series filmed in Monument Valley: 32 kilometres of spectacular desert rock formations in between Utah and Arizona which, thanks to Ford, would become indelibly linked with the landscape of the Western in the mind's eye of viewers forever after.

*Stagecoach* was the first Western to achieve the status of a "prestige" picture for many years, a trick achieved by playing up its melodramatic and romantic aspects to broaden its appeal. The Western was by this point so disreputable that even a name director like Ford had trouble getting the project off the ground. David O Selznick, at that point one of the most powerful men in Hollywood, whose magic touch would lead to *Gone With The Wind* shortly afterwards, wouldn't touch it. Neither would Darryl Zanuck at Fox, so it fell to Walter Wanger, an indie producer releasing his films through United Artists, to bankroll the film. Wanger's empty pockets meant it was impossible to film *Stagecoach* in colour, as originally intended, and Ford would have to wait a decade until *She Wore A Yellow Ribbon* to give Monument Valley the Technicolor treatment.



It's not too much of an exaggeration to say that *Stagecoach* bridges a gap between "old" Hollywood and the new generation that was approaching. Ford isn't a great one for moving his camera (making Wayne's entrance all the more startling), so most of the dialogue scenes are stagey. The major action sequence, where the stagecoach dashes to its destination under Apache attack, is full of mental silent-movie stunts, like the celebrated moment where veteran Wayne action-double (and uncredited

**"ORSON WELLES SAID HE'D WATCHED *STAGECOACH* AT LEAST 40 TIMES WHILE MAKING *CITIZEN KANE*."**

Hatfield (John Carradine), Dallas (Claire Trevor) and The Ringo Kid (John Wayne) await their ride.

second-unit director) Yakima Canutt falls under the horses' hooves and then under the wheels of the stage.

The film isn't without its flaws — there's script confusion regarding whether Gatewood does or doesn't know that the telegraph wires are down, and we might ponder why, during the chase, the Apaches don't just shoot the bloody horses. The characters are archetypes: heroic gunfighter; whore with a heart of gold; sozzled doctor; card-sharp who fancies himself a gentleman. But there's still a sophistication to *Stagecoach* that goes well beyond its silent movie and stage melodrama roots. *Citizen Kane* is the film widely credited with the "deep focus" revolution (keeping everything in the frame sharp), but Orson Welles picked it up here, from a scene during the Apache Wells interlude. He told Peter Bogdanovich that he'd watched *Stagecoach* at least 40 times during *Kane*'s preparation and filming.

The film was "modern" too, with the boo-hiss Gatewood — "What's good for the banks is good for the country!" — tapping into a Depression-era hatred of bankers that continues to resonate. And while the Spaghettis may have messed with Ford, Leone would nevertheless lovingly set *Once Upon A Time In The West* in Monument Valley, and Sergio Corbucci would lift the death of Luke Plummer for *Minnesota Clay*. Today's blockbusters — B movies promoted to the status of main features all — have their roots in the little coach that could. *Stagecoach* is a small film, but it casts a long shadow. **OWEN WILLIAMS**

# The Wizard Of Oz

## Cinema's ultimate rite of passage

**1939** / CERT **U** / DIRECTORS **VICTOR FLEMING, GEORGE CUKOR, MERVYN LEROY, NORMAN TAUROG, KING VIDOR** / SCREENWRITERS **NOEL LANGLEY, FLORENCE RYERSON** / CAST **JUDY GARLAND, RAY BOLGER, BERT LAHR, JACK HALEY**

"TRANSPORTED TO A surreal landscape, a young girl kills the first person she meets and then teams up with three strangers to kill again." From a TV column in the *Marin Independent Journal*, Rick Polite's cheeky capsule of the world's most beloved family film tickled ribs globally, because we all get it. We all saw *The Wizard Of Oz* when we were very young, and it scared the pants off everyone. This fantasy masterpiece is as bizarre as it is beguiling; more frightening than enchanting for younger children. Its malevolent hag, flying monkeys and Scarecrow dismemberment are bad enough, but when the Wicked Witch sets the Scarecrow afire is one of cinema's scariest moments.

*Oz* creator L Frank Baum aspired to "a modernised fairy tale, in which the wonderment and joy are retained and the heartaches and nightmares are left out", but what he wrote is quintessentially the stuff of tiny tears and frights. This most famous of American fables was published in 1900 and was the *Harry Potter*-esque phenomenon of its time — prompting a hit stage musical, 13 more *Oz* books by Baum, 26 additional authorised stories completing the 'Famous 40', and hundreds of non-canonical *Oz* tales. What the film brilliantly seizes on is that *The Wizard Of Oz* is one of the great world stories, not because of the wonderful things the wizard does, but because it's the Odyssey myth for children; it plays on their most instinctual fears.

The opening sets a tone of fearful anxiety as Margaret Hamilton's grim Miss Gulch pedals furiously in pursuit of Judy Garland's farm girl Dorothy Gale and her little dog Toto, accompanied by the witch's creepy seven-note musical theme (a compressed inversion of the cheery seven notes of *We're Off To See The Wizard*). Auntie Em, Uncle Henry and the farmhands are too busy to listen to the agitated Dorothy, so kids, identifying, are immediately hooked. What follows is a parable of every child's transition to adulthood: separation from the familiar and safe when the heroine is hurtled by a tornado into an unknown land. There she must find courage and friendship to succeed in her quest.

Things got scary on set, too, where the novel make-up and effects made for unusual accidents. Buddy Ebsen, originally cast as Scarecrow, amiably agreed to swap roles with dancer Ray Bolger and play the Tin Man. But he had an allergic reaction to the metallic make-up so extreme he nearly died, and was replaced by Jack Haley. (Ebsen can still be heard in the pre-recorded group vocals for *We're Off To See The Wizard*.) The copper in Margaret Hamilton's green make-up ignited in the fiery burst of smoke when her witch's cape caught in the trap-door exit from Munchkinland, hospitalising her. Several 'flying monkey' actors fell long and hard from the piano wires suspending them. Even Toto didn't escape unscathed, stepped on by one of the Wicked Witch's guards and out for two weeks with an ankle injury while a stand-in terrier doubled.

When MGM bought the film rights in 1938 for $75,000, it was a huge deal. (*Gone With The Wind* cost $50,000.) Contrary to legend, although executives flirted with the idea of borrowing Shirley Temple from Fox, Harold Arlen and EY 'Yip' Harburg set to work composing songs specifically for MGM's own teen star, Garland. Garland, at 16, had to have her breasts strapped to appear more childlike, but her insecurities and wistful vulnerability suited the material perfectly.

The adaptation went through 14 writers and five directors. Richard

**"LET THE POOR LITTLE GIRL IN, YOU DIRTY HAMS!' FLEMING BELLOWED AT GARLAND'S VAUDEVILLIAN COMPANIONS."**



The Tin Man (Jack Haley), Lion (Bert Lahr), Dorothy (Judy Garland) and Scarecrow (Ray Bolger) front The Gatekeeper (Frank Morgan) in the film that "scared the pants off everyone".




## ESSENTIAL 1939

### GONE WITH THE WIND
*Oz* director Victor Fleming also had a hand in the Oscar winner for Best Film, a Civil War epic that, adjusted for inflation, stands as the most popular movie of all time. Still worth giving a damn about.

### MR. SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON
Jimmy Stewart is at his idealistic peak as the man who takes on Senate corruption in Frank Capra's drama.

### NINOTCHKA
Billed with the tagline "Garbo laughs!", Ernst Lubitsch's winning comedy successfully restored The Swedish Sphinx to popularity.

### GOODBYE MR. CHIPS
Robert Donat earned the Best Actor Oscar for his reflective school teacher in this sentimental oldie.

### WUTHERING HEIGHTS
William Wyler directed this adaptation of Emily Bronte's dreamy romance classic, with a superb turn from Laurence Olivier as Heathcliff.

### THE ROARING TWENTIES
Raoul Walsh's tough prohibition tale was the last of James Cagney's Warner Bros hoodlums and filmed during the twilight of Humphrey Bogart's days as a supporting man.

Thorpe was fired 12 days into the shoot. George Cukor stepped in, shooting nothing but shrewdly ridding Garland of blonde curls and baby-doll make-up, before Victor Fleming took the helm. Garland remembered him as a kind man bellowing at her vaudevillian companions jockeying for prominence on the Yellow Brick Road: "Let the poor little girl in, you dirty hams!" When Fleming was pulled off to replace Cukor on *Gone With The Wind*, King Vidor finished the Munchkin sequence and black-and-white Kansas scenes. Producer Mervyn LeRoy also directed odds and sods, and it is to him that the film's authorship rightfully belongs, for controlling every aspect of the film from its casting to tricky effects like the tornado and wrangling the notoriously rambunctious Singer Midgets. The production cost over $2.7 million and initial takings were a disappointing $3 million. But the film never went away. It was regularly re-released theatrically, televised annually for years as a holiday event, and became the very first MGM title released on video (in 1980), by which time it was part of the fabric of childhood. Nostalgic parents who saw it as kids intuitively introduce it to new generations as a rite of passage.

Up against *Gone With The Wind*, Oz nabbed only three Oscars. But its imagery became iconic, its dialogue providing scads of universally recognised catchphrases. "Toto, I've got a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore," was voted fourth-most-famous movie quote in the AFI's poll. And *Over The Rainbow* topped their 100 Greatest Songs.

There have been countless reinterpretations. There were Russian, Japanese, Turkish and *Muppet* versions; black musical *The Wiz*; dark sequel *Return To Oz*; Saim Raimi's prequel *Oz The Great And Powerful*; and sundry animations. There is a mountain of merchandise, a Nintendo game, and *Wicked*, Gregory Maguire's satirical musical of *Oz*'s witches. There are websites devoted to the synchronicity between the film and Pink Floyd's *Dark Side Of The Moon*, and even an autobiography of the movie's terrier star Terry — *I, Toto* — "unearthed" and published in 2001.

Salman Rushdie saw it for the first time when he was ten years old and remembers, "It made a writer of me." That is its triumph: it feeds young imaginations with hopes and dreams and impossible possibilities as well as fears. **ANGIE ERRIGO**



# Citizen Kane

## The best film ever made?

**1941** / CERT **U** / DIRECTOR **ORSON WELLES** / SCREENWRITERS **HERMAN J MANKIEWICZ, ORSON WELLES** / CAST **ORSON WELLES, JOSEPH COTTEN, DOROTHY COMINGORE**

"WE ALL DREAM of being a child again, even the worst of us," concludes the wise old man at the end of *The Wild Bunch*. "Perhaps the worst most of all."

In essence, that's the answer to Rosebud — the riddle which threads through *Citizen Kane*. As the audience (but not the onscreen investigator) learns, Rosebud was the name of young Charlie Kane's sledge — but the word means more than a boy's toy. Rosebud is the dream of being a child again. Welles, making the film at the age of 25, is already gripped by nostalgia for an American innocence untarnished by brutality. The Christmas-card log cabin of Kane's childhood idyll is no more real than the vista trapped inside the snow-globe the old Kane drops as he whispers his enigmatic last word in a huge, moustached close-up.

On the surface Peckinpah's masterpiece might seem a movie world away from Orson Welles' startling debut, though Kane and *The Wild Bunch* both concentrate on the same few years in American history. The Colorado-born Kane is even a transplanted cowboy, his fabulous wealth flowing (like the silver which financed the Lone Ranger's crusade) from a magical Wild West mine. With something like prescience, Welles set aside the cowboy, the cop and the gangster as embodiments of America, and hit on the figure of the media mogul. The arc of Kane's tabloid career, from



The prodigy as a young man: Orson Welles, aged 25, as Charles Foster Kane.

scrawling to tearing up his Declaration Of Principles, resonates generations on, when we must wonder what Rosebuds curl tight and unopened in the hearts of Rupert Murdoch et al.

A film which explores the enigmas and ambiguities of one debatably great man's life, *Citizen Kane* now has as many myths about its making and reception and eventual rise from write-off to the Greatest Film Of All Time as its hotly disputed screenplay has about its subject.

Given carte blanche and all the resources of RKO ("the best train set a boy could have"), the young genius Welles — a man of the theatre and radio, about to succumb to a fatal passion for the movies — set out to make a movie which could only be construed as a personal attack on one of the few people who actually could make sure he never worked in this town again (at least at this level). Did he really not foresee this? Or could he just not resist tweaking the biggest nose in sight?

As in his theatre and radio work, Welles was a technical innovator, but preferred radical revisions of familiar material (a voodoo *Macbeth*, a fascist Caesar, a radio news *War Of The Worlds*) to generating his own stories. Written in collaboration with Joseph L Mankiewicz, *Citizen Kane* is a rise-and-fall biopic of a thinly veiled caricature of the newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst. If it has a genre, it's a big-business soap opera, informed by a fascination with the lives of the rich and repulsive

**"CITIZEN KANE REMAINS A DIZZYINGLY FAST, CHALLENGINGLY INTRICATE FILM."**

which seethes through trash like Harold Robbins' bestsellers or TV show *Dallas*. With Walter Huston or Lionel Barrymore as Kane and straightforward Hollywood storytelling, *Kane* could have been a hit like, say, *The Toast Of New York* (about robber baron James Fisk) or *American Madness* (about the bank crisis of the 1930s). But Welles didn't want to make a film like those...

*Citizen Kane* remains a dizzyingly fast, challengingly intricate film, and the fact that so many other movies (especially biopics) have taken cues from it still doesn't take away from its bravura. It opens with a visual tour of a fog-shrouded haunted house, with forgotten gondolas, ignored apes and crated statues under that wrought-iron curlicue K gate with the "No Trespassing" sign. Glimpses of the death of Kane are followed by the pastiche newsreel ("News On The March") that gives all the story the film is ever going to deliver in a ten-minute trot through the essentials of the life of Charles Foster Kane. Only after that, in deep shadows, does the near-faceless sleuth, newsreel reporter Thompson (William Alland), set out to explore the maze. He looks up those who loved and hated the just-dead tycoon to piece together his story (it's no accident that jigsaws are a recurrent image in the film), and perhaps come up with a solution to the mystery of Rosebud.

To explore Kane's life, Welles is willing to try everything: a skitter through a marriage in a series of breakfast scenes which segue from charmingly intimate to utterly terrifying; a near-*Rashomon*-like series of different takes on the same events (the objective and subjective views of Susan Alexander's disastrous operatic debut); editorial comment; Gothic excess (the camera angles and lighting change as Kane ages and congeals, suggesting a life — all lives? — which turns from adventure to comedy to film noir to horror); shrieking melodrama and witty banter. In everything, Kane is ambiguous — he isn't as much of a monster as Hearst seems from the history books, since Welles bends over backwards to give him points — but so is Welles, and so is the movie. Yes, this is the work of a monumental ego and credit-hog, but Welles lists himself last in the cast, after giving the supporting players individual snippets to illustrate their billing. He might (as has been often said) have grudged Joseph L Mankiewicz a co-writer credit, but he unprecedentedly lets cinematographer Gregg Toland share the final card and thus take equal authorship with him.

The greatness of *Citizen Kane* — apart from its scurrilous, busy, yapping ingenuity and eagerness to entertain — is that we can never get its depths, even after repeated viewings. Welles himself dismissed Rosebud as "dollar-book Freud" and others have found the punchline reductive, but there's no real answer. "Mr Kane was a man who got everything he wanted and then lost it," says Thompson. "Maybe Rosebud was something he couldn't get, or something he lost. Anyway, it wouldn't have explained anything. I don't think any word can explain a man's life. No, I guess Rosebud is just a piece in a jigsaw puzzle... a missing piece." **KIM NEWMAN**



Fred MacMurray, Tom Powers and Barbara Stanwyck: "sex and avarice".

# Double Indemnity

## The sexiest film about insurance ever

**1944** / CERT **PG** / DIRECTOR **BILLY WILDER** / SCREENWRITERS **BILLY WILDER, RAYMOND CHANDLER** / CAST **FRED MACMURRAY, BARBARA STANWYCK, EDWARD G ROBINSON**

THERE'S AMPLE EVIDENCE to support the notion that George Raft was the stupidest man in Hollywood. Shortly after turning down the role of Roy 'Mad Dog' Earl in *High Sierra*, the film that made Humphrey Bogart a star, he declined to play Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*, the film that made Bogart an icon. And *Casablanca*? Raft wasn't interested. He also talked himself out of the lead in this, Billy Wilder's definitive noir, which is among the greatest crime movies in history.

When Wilder read Raft the script (Raft was illiterate), he quickly became impatient and urged him to get to the "badge moment". Since *Double Indemnity* is about a mild-mannered insurance salesman seduced into a murder plot by a scheming femme fatale, Wilder was understandably confused. The "badge moment", Raft explained, no doubt tersely, was the point where the salesman reveals that he is, in fact, an undercover cop out to entrap a murderess. Wilder's response is not recorded. But needless to say, that was the end of Raft's involvement with the movie.

The role of Walter Neff eventually went to Fred MacMurray, happily an infinitely better choice than Raft thanks to his affinity for playing decent, upstanding citizens (a crucial element of the plot).

A "double indemnity" is a clause in a life insurance policy that ensures twice the normal pay-out if a death is accidental. It's this that Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck, in a career-best performance) plans to exploit by killing her husband, an undertaking for which she needs an accomplice. Enter Walter Neff...

You need neither to have seen the film before, read the James M Cain novel upon which it's based, nor be any more familiar with the conventions of film noir than the vagaries of quantum mechanics, to know that the moment Stanwyck appears at the top of the staircase (clad only in a bath towel) and peers down at the hot-and-bothered MacMurray, the poor sap is toast.

It's the oldest of old stories — a good man lured to his doom by greed and lust — but it's told with such hardboiled panache, it transcends even Cain's classic novel. Cain himself thought so. After seeing the film, the revered author wished he'd thought of the modified plot twists, praising the ending as better than his own.

However, where the script differs most from the novel is in the dialogue. Quite how you improve upon the quality of Cain's dialogue is a question worth asking. The answer? Recruit none other than Raymond Chandler. Which, after Wilder's long-time writing partner Charles Brackett baulked at the sordidness of the story, is exactly what he did. But it was not a happy collaboration.

Chandler, new to Hollywood and sensing easy money, tossed off a first draft

**"DEFINITIVE NOIR, AND AMONG THE GREATEST CRIME MOVIES IN HISTORY."**

in a weekend. Wilder, in turn, tossed it bin-wards, declaring it 80 pages of "useless camera directions", and informed an affronted Chandler that, henceforth, they'd be working together. The relationship proved so fraught that Chandler, a recovering alcoholic, was driven back to the bottle. Wilder later claimed he was inspired to make *The Lost Weekend* to "show Chandler himself".

It was the film's dialogue that they clashed over most heatedly. Wilder insisted they stick as closely as possible to the book; Chandler equally insisted that Cain's dialogue would not transfer well to film. He even roped in two studio contract players to read lines and prove the point. Grudgingly, Wilder conceded he was right. A rare instance of Wilder being bested — but the results verge on poetry. "How could I have known that murder sometimes smells like honeysuckle?" says Neff, recalling his first, fateful visit to the Dietrichson house.

Although the term film noir had yet to be coined, *Double Indemnity* is a paradigm of noir conventions, from John F Seitz's stark black-and-white cinematography (odd angles; slanting light) to MacMurray's grim voiceover, narrating events in flashback while his life leaks away from a fatal gunshot wound. Stanwyck epitomises the genre's essential evil seductress, and she and MacMurray are the archetypal noir couple, a marriage of sex and avarice that leads inexorably to the grave. "We're both rotten," says Dietrichson. "Only you're a little more rotten," replies Neff.

And all that is without mentioning Edward G Robinson as Neff's boss Barton Keyes, the moral centre of the film. Robinson was still in the prime of his career in 1944, and for him to take a supporting role was unusual to say the least. Unlike Raft, though, he knew a good thing when he saw it, and consequently turned in one of his most memorable performances — and a memorable performance from Edward G Robinson is one for the ages.

"Yes, I killed him," says Neff, recording his confession for Keyes to hear. "I killed him for money — and a woman — and I didn't get the money and I didn't get the woman. Pretty, isn't it?" In a word: beautiful.

For the record, George Raft's next picture was the musical *Nob Hill*, a film not getting the Masterpiece treatment any time soon. **SIMON BRAUND**



Bacall and Bogart: perfect casting.

# The Big Sleep

**Bogart and Bacall provide better viewing through chemistry**

**1946** / CERT **PG** / DIRECTOR **HOWARD HAWKS** / SCREENWRITERS **WILLIAM FAULKNER, LEIGH BRACKETT, JULES FURTHAM** / CAST **HUMPHREY BOGART, LAUREN BACALL, JOHN RIDGELY**

**VIVIAN**: SPEAKING OF horses, I like to play them myself. But I like to see them work out a little first. See if they're front-runners or come from behind, find out what their whole card is, what makes them run...
**Marlowe**: Find out mine?
**Vivian**: I think so.
**Marlowe**: Go ahead.
**Vivian**: I'd say you don't like to be rated. You like to get out in front, open up a lead, take a little breather in the back stretch, and then come home free...
**Marlowe**: You don't like to be rated yourself.
**Vivian**: I haven't met anyone yet who can do it. Any suggestions?
**Marlowe**: Well, I can't tell 'til I've seen you over a distance of ground. You've got a touch of class, but I don't know how, how far you can go.
**Vivian**: A lot depends on who's in the saddle.

First of all, these people are not talking about horse-racing. Secondly, this scintillating exchange, between Humphrey Bogart as Philip Marlowe and Lauren Bacall as Vivian Rutledge, appears in only one of two available versions of *The Big Sleep*, director Howard Hawks' peerless adaptation of Raymond Chandler's equally fêted private eye novel. There are several explanations why.

The least plausible stems from comments Chandler made to the studio about Bacall — or rather, comments he made about Martha Vickers, who plays Vivian's kid sister Carmen, a performance the author deemed so terrific it blew Bacall off the screen. In response, Warner Bros, industriously grooming Bacall for stardom, virtually cut Vickers out of the picture and inserted new scenes to amp up their new ingénue.

There might be a grain of truth here — Chandler certainly did rave about Vickers, and was none too impressed with Bacall — but a more credible version of events is that Warner held up the release of *The Big Sleep* to clear a backlog of war movies that, they felt, had a limited shelf-life now that hostilities were drawing to a close. A version of the film was released to the US military and exhibited to overseas servicemen in 1945, but the definitive ›

article did not hit screens until 23 August, 1946. In the interim, Bogey-Bacall mania had mushroomed thanks to their sensational double-act in *To Have And Have Not* and equally sensational marriage in May 1945 (he was 45, she was 20). lt was to capitalise on this that Warner Bros had Hawks shoot over 20 minutes of new footage, including the above bit of verbal foreplay, to emphasise their chemistry.

Hawks' original cut recently resurfaced and, thanks to *Playboy* honcho Hugh Hefner, who helped raise funds for the restoration, was released on DVD. A side-by-side comparison of the two versions is edifying. Hawks' original is an excellent, fast-paced and stylish crime drama with a mind-bogglingly convoluted plot that, nonetheless, makes a fair approximation of sense if you pay attention. The second cut is a sublime noir thriller dominated by its two leads, richly imbued with blackmail, murder and moxie, laced with an illicit whiff of gambling, drugs and sleazy sex, straining at the seams with the type of simmering erotic tension that could only have been cooked up in Code-era Hollywood. And it makes absolutely no sense.

Editing in the additional scenes did necessitate chopping swathes of expositionary dialogue to maintain the running time (there's less than three minutes' difference between the two versions), which does render the notoriously Byzantine goings-on virtually impossible to follow. And even if it didn't, keeping track is no guarantee of things adding up. Far from it, in fact. One day during the shoot, Bacall remembers in her autobiography, Bogart walked onto the set with a look of bemusement on his face. It had occurred to him that nowhere in the script was it explained who had killed General Stern wood's chauffeur Owen Taylor, who, lying unconscious in his car, is driven off the end of a pier. Hawks was stumped. He consulted his screenwriters, an illustrious team including William Faulkner. They were equally clueless. Eventually a telegram was dispatched to Chandler himself. "Damned if I know," he replied. You'll also go blind trying to figure out who killed Geiger, the shady book dealer; why Carol Lundgren bumps off Joe Brody; and exactly what the bloody hell happened to Sean Regan, the Sternwood family factotum whose mysterious disappearance is responsible for the entire can of entangled worms.

But the point is, none of this matters. Every other aspect of *The Big Sleep* is so serenely self-assured that you quickly abandon any attempt to unravel the storyline and surrender instead to its supercool spell — the whip-fast, martini-dry dialogue (Carmen: "You're not very tall, are you?"; Marlowe: "Well, I try to be"); the glut of picturesque characters, all impeccably cast and played; Hawks' crisp, propulsive direction; Sid Hickox's radiant cinematography, coaxing noir mystique from LA's sun-bleached streets; and Max Steiner's subtly calibrated minor-key score. It's quite a package.

But it is, more than anything else, of course, the electrifying interplay between Bogart and Bacall that makes *The Big Sleep* such an endlessly rewarding experience. And neither Howard Hawks nor William Faulkner nor even Raymond Chandler can take credit for that. The fact that they were falling in love as the cameras rolled is self-evident, but lurking in the background was a deeper dimension to their blossoming relationship that added a crucial edge of poignancy to their on-screen romance. At the time, Bogart was in the throes of a horrible divorce from third wife Mayo Methot, a hugely jealous, belligerent alcoholic who once attacked him with a carving knife. Close to breaking point, Bogart was drinking himself into an even earlier grave than the one that awaited him. He was a man ready to be rescued. And that's still plain to see: not even the veneer of Marlowe's sardonic detachment can hide it. Against all the odds, Bogart found, in this nervous yet feisty teenage girl, who could give him as good as she got on-screen and off, the woman who saved his life. And chemistry like that demands to be exploited, even if we never do find out who killed the damn chauffeur. **KIM NEWMAN**

**"A SUBLIME NOIR, IMBUED WITH BLACKMAIL, MURDER AND MOXIE."**



# Bicycle Thieves

**The definitive antidote to Hollywood excess**

**1948** / CERT **U** / DIRECTOR **VITTORIO DE SICA** / SCREENWRITERS **ORESTE BIANCOLI, SUSO CECCHI D'AMICO, VITTORIO DE SICA** / CAST **LAMBERTO MAGGIORANI, ENZO STAIOLA, LIANELLA CARELL**

IN *THE PLAYER*, Robert Altman's magnificent mouthful of the hand that fed him, *Bicycle Thieves* (or *The Bicycle Thief*, as it is sometimes known) is cited as the definitive antidote to Hollywood movies. Why, you may ask, would Altman cast this little film, directed by Vittorio De Sica in 1948, in such an emblematic role? Well, first of all, it performs exactly the same function in the Michael Tolkin novel from which *The Player* was adapted. But secondly, it fits the bill with gratifying precision.

Its storyline is reductively simple (a man searches for a stolen bicycle he needs in order to keep his job); it has no heroes, no villains, no romance, no action, no stars (no professional actors at all, in fact) and it does not have a happy ending. Plus it was shot on location on the mean streets of post-war Rome in grainy



The crowd catch Antonio (Lamberto Maggiorani) and Bruno (Enzo Staiola) in *Bicycle Thieves*.

black-and-white on a budget that wouldn't pay for a day's Craft Services on the average Hollywood production.

In spite of all that — or rather because of it — *Bicycle Thieves* remains among the most beloved films ever made, a heart-rending, poetic and compassionate rumination on the human condition that, as has often been said, invests the mundane tribulations of ordinary people with the power and pathos of Greek tragedy. lt has exerted an incalculable influence on international cinema, working its low-key magic on filmmakers from Fellini to Jean-Luc Godard to John Cassavetes to Tim Burton (and, yes, we are talking about *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* here). In 2001 Chinese director Xiaoshuai Wang made *Beijing Bicycle*, a loving homage to *Bicycle Thieves*, if not a direct remake, which reflected the social fabric of contemporary China just as De Sica's film reflects the desperation of an Italy shattered by World War II. But before we get into that, a word or two on Italian neo-realism.

Neo-realism was a movement born amid the rubble of the war, an attempt to capture the true nature of a country and its people devastated by the conflict and reeling from almost 20 years of fascist rule. Kicked off by Luchino Visconti's 1943 film *Ossessione* (some would claim Roberto Rossellini's 1946 *Rome, Open City*), neo-realism can be viewed as a furious, flipped finger to the opulently vapid 'white telephone' movies of the Mussolini era. Its aim was to portray ordinary lives with honesty and integrity. To that end, De Sica shot *Bicycle Thieves* entirely on location, largely with available light and with a cast of non-actors. Lamberto Maggiorani, who plays Antonio, the lead role, was a factory worker who struggled to find a job once filming was complete. Just how "real" the neo-realism in *Bicycle Thieves* is can be appreciated in a scene where seven-year-old Enzo Staiola (playing Antonio's son Bruno) narrowly avoids being flattened by a car while crossing the road. Twice.

The film began life as a novel of the same name by Luigi Bartolini. lt was adapted for the screen by Cesare Zavattini, whose partnership with De Sica yielded 12 films including such worthy siblings to *Bicycle Thieves* as *Shoe-Shine* (1946), *Miracle In Milan* (1951) and *Umberto D.* (1952). The action — if you can call it that — focuses on poverty-stricken, unemployed Antonio, who is offered a job as a bill poster on the condition that he owns his own bicycle. Luckily he does. Unluckily it is in the pawn shop. To reclaim the bicycle Antonio's wife Maria hocks her wedding sheets. In a scene of unmatched poignancy, Maria hands over the sheets to the pawnbroker and, as the camera pans up, they are placed on a shelf stacked high with the bridal bed linen of other women driven to the same last resort. Shortly after Antonio begins his job, his bicycle is stolen and he and son Bruno embark on a quest through the foreboding backstreets of Rome to get it back. Antonio and Bruno eventually find the thief but he has already sold the bicycle and, in any case, his neighbours are willing to give him an alibi. Walking home, Antonio and Bruno pass a football stadium and Antonio, falling prey to temptation, steals a bicycle from the hundreds parked outside. He is caught immediately by the crowd and, although the owner refuses to press charges, Antonio is humiliated in front of his son — a far worse fate for a proud man.

*Bicycle Thieves* has been criticised for its lack of political perception, the case being that in presenting an unadorned view of its subjects' lives it fails to reveal the social mechanisms that determine them. This is a little like criticising *The Seventh Seal* for its lack of car chases. The film makes no claims to political insight (and anyone with a basic grasp of 20th century European history can fill in all the background); it is, like the best films, a good story, well told. And in its depiction of a man's relationship with his son, it is almost unbearably touching. First there is the scene where Antonio and Bruno prepare to go to work in the early morning, dressed in matching overalls and pocketing their meagre packed lunches. Then, while they are searching for the thief, there is the shocking moment when Antonio, in rage and frustration, hits Bruno — an act he atones for by buying pizza that he cannot afford. And, of course, there is the ending: Bruno reaching out to grasp his father's hand — the first time he does so in the entire film — while the tears course down Antonio's cheeks. Walking away towards an uncertain future, the football crowd quickly swallows them up (again in defiance of the Hollywood tradition; no iconic ride into the sunset for Antonio and Bruno), reminding us that their story is just one among many. **SIMON BRAUND**

# Red River

## The Duke goes dark

**1948** / CERT **U** / DIRECTORS **HOWARD HAWKS, ARTHUR ROSSON** / SCREENWRITERS **BORDEN CHASE, CHARLES SCHNEE** / CAST **JOHN WAYNE, MONTGOMERY CLIFT, JOANNE DRU**

FOR ANYONE WHO has never credited The Duke as much of an actor — and let's face it, even his most ardent fans would agree he was no Olivier — *Red River* will come as a revelation. "I never knew the big son of a bitch could act!" was John Ford's comment when he saw the film for the first time. What is also surprising is that Wayne plays a bad guy. And not by any stretch a stock Western bad guy with a black hat and a snarl. Haunted by tragedy, Texas cattle rancher Thomas Dunson is an emotionally wounded man whose deeply flawed character reveals itself under extremes of physical and psychological hardship. In the Wayne canon, only *The Searchers*' Ethan Edwards rivals Dunson for complexity and inner conflict. It's significant that the role was first offered to Gary Cooper. He turned it down, worried that it would damage his wholesome image.

The saga begins when Dunson, facing hard times in Civil War-ravaged Texas, determines to drive his cattle hundreds of miles north to the railhead at Missouri where, he believes, they will sell for a decent price. He is joined in the venture by his adopted son Matt (Montgomery Clift in his film debut), trusty trail hand Nadine Groot (Walter Brennan) and hired gunman Cherry Valance (John Ireland, substitute for a reluctant Cary Grant). Also along for the ride are silent Western star Harry Carey and his son, Harry Carey Jr, whose own lengthy career encompassed many excellent Westerns (*The Searchers*, *She Wore A Yellow Ribbon*, *The Long Riders*, *Tombstone* etc) and one absolute stinker (1966's *Billy The Kid Vs Dracula*). No Western of the period, it seems, would have been complete without the wonderful Hank Worden, whose quavery voice and rail-thin frame graced 17 movies with Wayne, among them *Stagecoach*, *The Searchers* and *True Grit*. He shows up here in his customary role of rustic savant.

The cast was rounded out by the radiant Joanne Dru (love interest for Clift), the scarcely less radiant Coleen Gray, and Noah Beery Jr, best known for playing Jim Rockford's dad on *The Rockford Files*.

As an ensemble it could hardly be bettered, and the pairing of seasoned veteran Wayne with newcomer Clift was nothing short of inspired. Off screen, the two were diametric opposites in almost every conceivable respect, from political persuasion to sexual orientation, and the tension off the set undoubtedly spilled over into their performances.

The drive starts off in high spirits with the famous, "Yee-haw!" scene (memorably referenced in *City Slickers*), Matt and the trail hands whooping it up as they get the huge herd under way. It's interesting to note that Texas Longhorn cattle had been virtually extinct for decades in 1948, and director Howard Hawks had only a couple of dozen to work with. Using them like dress extras, he positioned them carefully to disguise the fact that the bulk of the herd were Herefords.

Conditions on the trail deteriorate rapidly and during a stampede — a legendary, superbly orchestrated sequence that builds to a thundering crescendo — Carey Jr's character is killed. As the drive becomes more arduous, Dunson becomes increasingly tyrannical and when he refuses, against all reason, to make for a new railhead in Abilene, much closer than Missouri, dissent begins to fester. Things come to a head when Dunson, his obsession to reach Missouri now bordering on mania, attempts to lynch two hands for desertion. Outright rebellion ensues, with Matt the leader.



The face-off between Wayne and Clift is the crux of the story. Shocking as it is to see Wayne, invariably the embodiment of manly virtue, bent on cold-blooded murder, it's more shocking still to see him bested by Clift, left wounded and marooned on the prairie, swearing revenge.

The company, now under Matt's command, head for Abilene. En route, they rescue a wagon train from an Indian attack. It's here that Matt meets and falls

**"IT REMAINS ONE OF THE MOST LYRICAL, BEAUTIFULLY SHOT AND COMPELLING WESTERNS EVER MADE."**

The Duke in full fly: John Wayne delivers the performance of a lifetime in *Red River*.

in love with Tess Millay (Dru) who, in an echo of the events that haunt Dunson, he leaves behind in order to beat his stepfather to Abilene.

When the inevitable showdown between Matt and Dunson ensues, it is as bitter and vicious as events have led us to expect, and both Wayne and Clift are in blistering form. Oddly, though, it's here that *Red River* strikes its only — and only very slightly — off note. The furious fight between Matt and Dunson is broken up by Tess who, in a miraculously persuasive moment, forces them to realise the deep love they have for each other. Of course, the conventions of the time demanded just such a reconciliation and contemporary audiences would have been outraged had they been denied it. And in fact, the upbeat ending is only disappointing in context.

In Borden Chase's original story, Dunson is shot and mortally wounded by Valance in Abilene. Matt and Tess, now betrothed, take him back across the Red River so that he can die on Texan soil. Chase fought hard to keep this ending in the script but was overruled by Hawks.

That the ending is the only controversial aspect of *Red River* says much. It remains one of the most lyrical, beautifully shot and compelling Westerns ever made. It also offers irrefutable evidence that the big son of a bitch could, indeed, act. **SIMON BRAUND**

Humphrey Bogart, indelible as Dobbs on *Sierra Madre*'s Mexican set.

# The Treasure Of The Sierra Madre

## John Huston's masterful adventure yarn is fried gold

**1948** / CERT **PG** / DIRECTOR **JOHN HUSTON** / SCREENWRITER **JOHN HUSTON** / CAST **HUMPHREY BOGART, WALTER HUSTON, TIM HOLT**

THERE'S A HOLLYWOOD legend that, when Humphrey Bogart won his only Oscar for *The African Queen*, director John Huston quipped to his star, "See kid, I told you real leeches would pay off in the end." Whether it's true or not, a similar, if less repellent, tactic paid off with *The Treasure Of The Sierra Madre*. Huston persuaded his father Walter, cast as Howard, the garrulous old-timer who leads a pair of greenhorn prospectors (Bogart and Tim Holt) on a perilous quest for gold in the mountains of northern Mexico, to play the part without his false teeth. Huston Sr subsequently won an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor. Huston Jr won for Best Director, and his insistence on authenticity didn't end with his dad's dentures.

It's ironic that one of the few criticisms aimed at *The Treasure Of The Sierra Madre* is that certain scenes have an unconvincing, studio-bound quality. That's undeniably true; most of the nighttime campfire scenes take place on a Warner Bros soundstage. But in fact, *Sierra Madre* was among the first Hollywood movies to be shot almost entirely on location outside the United States, in Tamaulipas, Mexico. It was Jack L Warner who, much to Huston's disgust, ordered the unit back to Hollywood when the budget edged over $3 million.

Based on the classic 1927 adventure yarn by mysterious German-English novelist B Traven, the film hit a stumbling block early on. Shortly after arriving in Tampico, the capital of Tamaulipas, the production was abruptly shut down by the local authorities, riled by newspaper reports that the film was critical of Mexico. Undeterred, Huston called on his good friends Diego Rivera and Miguel Covarrubias, both celebrated artists, to petition Mexican President Miguel Valdés on his behalf. The accusations were dropped in short order and the cameras rolled. Thereafter, aside from the inevitable hardships of a months-long shoot in inhospitable terrain, and John Huston's serious allergic reaction to marijuana — a drug he had never tried before and never touched again — filming progressed with a relative lack of incident.

Apart from being a tense and thrilling adventure story, *Sierra Madre* is also a grim morality tale, adhering closely to the biblical notion that the love of money is the root of all evil. From the outset, when a fateful lottery win funds the expedition, it is clear that things are not going to end well. The wise and wily Howard sets the mood with a warning to his companions, the hot-headed Dobbs (Bogart) and the placid Curtin (Holt): "I know what gold does to men's souls," he tells them as they set out on their gruelling trek into the interior. "As long as there's no find, the noble brotherhood will last, but when the piles of gold begin to grow... That's when the trouble starts." Deep in the mountains the men strike the mother lode, but it's not long before the prescience of Howard's words is revealed. As the piles of gold do indeed begin to grow, the bonds of camaraderie crumble, and as Dobbs' greed and paranoia descend into madness, a tragic denouement becomes increasingly assured.

Aside from the superb performances — even from Tim Holt, whose essential blandness works well against Huston's feistiness and Bogart's mania — and John Huston's taut direction, the film abounds with memorable moments and endlessly quotable dialogue. There's Walter Huston's impish jig over the gold seam (a move he learnt from Eugene O'Neill while appearing in O'Neill's play, *Desire Under The Elms*, in 1924), and the Gila-monster-under-the-rock sequence, a *mano a mano* between Dobbs and Curtin that foreshadows their final, deadly encounter. Perhaps the most famous scene is the moment when bandit chief Gold Hat (Mexican character actor Alfonso Bedoya), masquerading as a Federale, responds to Dobbs's request for identification with the immortal line, "Badges? We ain't got no badges. We don't need no badges. I don't have to show you any steenking badges." There's a couple of notable cameos, too: John Huston as the white-suited tourist whom Dobbs repeatedly entreats to "help a fellow American down on his luck"; and, allegedly, Bogart's *They Drive By Night* co-star Ann Sheridan as a prostitute. (Debate still rages over whether Sheridan appeared or not. Production stills show her on set and in costume alongside Bogart and Holt, but she bears very little resemblance to the figure actually in the film. The consensus is that she filmed the scene and was later, for some reason, replaced.) And, though it hardly counts as a cameo, it's interesting to note that the street urchin who sells Dobbs the winning lottery ticket, thus setting the whole train of events in motion, was played by Robert Blake, former Little Rascal and future star of TV cop show *Baretta*, who in 2005 beat an OJ Simpson-style murder rap after facing charges over the violent death of his wife, Bonnie Lee.

Also, typical of a Huston movie, the background stories are marvellously bizarre. The best of them concerns Traven himself. Huston had harboured a fascination with the reclusive — and still not conclusively identified — author for years and had wanted to adapt *Sierra Madre* for the screen ever since he first read the book in 1936. It reminded him, he claimed, of his time serving in the Mexican cavalry. Naturally, once Traven had approved him as director, he invited him to contribute to the film. True to form, Traven declined, but did send his good friend Hal Croves to the set to act as technical advisor for a fee of $150 a week. It's virtually certain that Croves was, in fact, the enigmatic Traven acting incognito. Huston's wife, Evelyn Keyes, was convinced of it, claiming he constantly gave himself away by saying "I" when he should have said "he", and repeating phrases verbatim from his letters to Huston. The odd thing was, Traven had been offered $1,000 a week to do the job.

Ultimately, though, what endures to this day is the film itself, a masterful character study of desperates tested to the limit of physical and psychological endurance and how they respond to the challenge — Howard with wry resignation that somehow fails to dull his enthusiasm; Curtin with misplaced credulity; and Dobbs, the most human of all, with murderous avarice. To watch *The Treasure Of The Sierra Madre* is to learn what gold, with all the metaphorical baggage that simple word brings with it, does to men's souls. **SIMON BRAUND**

# All About Eve

## Bette Davis takes on Anne Baxter in the ultimate battle of the bitches

**1950** / CERT **U** / DIRECTOR **JOSEPH L MANKIEWICZ** / SCREENWRITER **JOSEPH L MANKIEWICZ** / CAST **BETTE DAVIS, ANNE BAXTER, GEORGE SANDERS**



BETTE DAVIS' PERFORMANCE as ageing actress Margo Channing in this, Joseph L Mankiewicz's biting Broadway satire, is widely regarded as the crowning achievement of her career. Think about that for a moment. The crowning achievement of a career that encompassed leading roles in *Now, Voyager*, *The Little Foxes*, *Jezebel* and *The Private Lives Of Elizabeth And Essex*, a heap of awards including two Oscars from 11 nominations, constant plaudits as the greatest screen actress of her, or anyone else's, generation, and the victor's laurels in a feud with the monstrous Joan Crawford, perhaps the most prolonged and malevolent in Hollywood history. If that were the only thing *All About Eve* had going for it, it would still be more worthy of acclaim than exactly 94.8 per cent of the celluloid ever run through a camera.

Of course, it has a great deal more to distinguish itself than that, including a transcendentally witty script by Mankiewicz, from a short story by actress-author Mary Orr, and a supporting cast comprised of George Sanders, Anne Baxter, Thelma Ritter and Marilyn Monroe. *Eve* was one of Monroe's first major movies, and it's an indication of the quality on offer here that it's easy to forget she was even in it.

The plot of *All About Eve* is simple enough, and it's one that has been reworked many times before and since. Margo Channing is an eminent Broadway diva, the toast of the Great White Way for decades, but the years are beginning to take their toll. With her star beginning to fade, she welcomes into her life a wide-eyed young girl who claims to be her biggest fan. This is Eve Harrington (Baxter, also never better), all breathy, butter-wouldn't-melt ingénue on the outside, all scheming, duplicitous, manipulative bitch on the inside — a bobby sox Machiavelli. Having established herself firmly as the viper in the nest, Eve connives to first become Margo's personal assistant and then her understudy, all part of a carefully laid plan — which doesn't fall shy of blackmail or sabotage — to oust her mentor and usurp her crown. That Eve's plan succeeds is never in any doubt, since the story is, like *Sunset Blvd.* (which was released the same year), told in flashback, ostensibly by acid-tongued theatre critic Addison DeWitt (Sanders, at his suavely sardonic best). The film opens at a swank awards dinner at which Eve is the guest of honour. DeWitt's mordant voiceover, his solemn promise to spill the beans on the little minx and her meteoric rise to fame, is accompanied by a close-up of Eve's sweetly smiling face. It's a juxtaposition that sets the tone for

**"STILL MORE WORTHY OF ACCLAIM THAN 94.8 PER CENT OF CINEMA."**



Face off: Anne Baxter and Bette Davis create sparks that outblaze a seated Marilyn Monroe.

the revelry to come.

As with all legendary performances, Davis' portrayal of Margo, a woman struggling to accept with grace the inexorable march of time in an industry that is inherently and mercilessly ageist, leaves you unable to imagine anyone else playing the part. In fact, Davis was neither Mankiewicz's nor producer Darryl F Zanuck's first choice. Mankiewicz wrote the script with Susan Hayward in mind, but she was rejected as too young by Zanuck. Marlene Dietrich — that would have been interesting — was deemed "too German" (a result, perhaps, of being German), and Gertrude Lawrence was ruled out when her agent, on hearing the pitch, cooed, "Wouldn't it be nice if Gertie sat by the piano and sang?" Zanuck wanted Barbara Stanwyck but she was unavailable, and Gloria Swanson was busy with her own grand dame in decline. That really left no choice. And, sure enough, the part went to Claudette Colbert. Now, there's no doubt that Colbert, a singularly talented comic actress, would have made a fine Margo Channing. Happily, however, she sustained a serious back injury shortly before production began and had to pull out. Something that Jeanne Crain's husband conspicuously did not do, thus rendering her "too pregnant" to play Eve and leaving the way clear for Baxter who, like Davis, made the role her own. In other casting news, both Ronald and Nancy Reagan (or Nancy Davis as she was then known) were briefly considered for roles, although not, heaven forbid, the leads.

The parallels between *All About Eve* and *Sunset Blvd.* have been noted many times, and for films made well over half a century ago, both exert a powerful hold on the popular imagination. And if it's true that *Sunset* has the upper hand on that score (although *Eve* got its musical adaptation, *Applause*, starring Lauren Bacall, 20 years before Andrew Lloyd Webber worked his special magic on Billy Wilder's masterpiece), *Eve* still pops up with astonishing regularity. It's referenced in everything from *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* to *The Simpsons*, *The L Word*, *Gossip Girl* and *High School Musical 3: Senior Year* (look out for a loving homage to *Midnight Cowboy* in *High School Musical 4: The Male Prostitution Years*). Pedro Almodóvar pays the film fulsome tribute in 1999's *All About My Mother*, which is strewn with references: in the opening scene, mother and son, Manuela (Cecilia Roth) and Esteban (Eloy Azorín), are watching a dubbed version on television. When the title *Eve Unveiled* appears on the screen, Esteban points out that it should be *Todo Sobre Eve*, which is the correct translation. And then, of course, there are '80s shoegazers All About Eve, who had success in 1988 with the song *Martha's Harbour*. And in case any former members of the band are reading this: you were not worthy. **SIMON BRAUND**



Gloria Swanson and William Holden's decedent duo at the heart of *Sunset Boulevard*.

# Sunset Boulevard

## Billy Wilder lampoons Hollywood. Hollywood doesn't LOL

**1950** / CERT **PG** / DIRECTOR **BILLY WILDER** / SCREENWRITERS **BILLY WILDER, CHARLES BRACKETT, DM MARSHMAN JR** / CAST **WILLIAM HOLDEN, GLORIA SWANSON, ERICH VON STROHEIM, TAYLOR, OTTO PREMINGER**

### SETTING: A PREVIEW

of *Sunset Boulevard*, somewhere in Poughkeepsie, New York. The audience is laughing hysterically and director Billy Wilder is not happy. The opening just doesn't work. And it had looked so good on paper: "An attendant wheels the dead Joe Gillis (Holden) into a huge, bare, windowless room. Along the walls are 20 or so sheet-covered corpses in an orderly row... feet stretch out from under the sheets; men's feet, women's feet, children's — with a tag dangling from each toe. The attendant exits, switching off the light. For a moment the room is semi-dark, the music takes on a more astral phase..."

And the corpses start talking to each other, sketching out Gillis' biography and the tale of how he wound up on the slab. The punters were meant to find it wryly amusing and slightly ghoulish; it was meant to pique their interest. But these guys were honking like it was some Abbott And Costello movie. Schmoozing corpses! Whatever next! Wilder had no objection to uncontrolled guffawing; one of his favourite audience response cards had been, "I laughed so hard I peed in my girlfriend's hand." But it was no good at the opening for *Sunset Boulevard*, where any laughs should be either mordant or horrified. So he sighed and went back to the drawing board. And one of the greatest openings in cinema history was born.

Instead of a morgue, Wilder placed Gillis floating face-down in a swimming pool. We view him from below, looking upwards from the pool's bottom. Through the rippling surface, cops peer down and press flashbulbs flicker. It's a weird, surreal image, as if Gillis is suspended in some strange dimension halfway between life and death. Which, it turns out, is entirely appropriate, as he has been trapped in a kind of purgatory all along, his soul sold for the price of a camel-hair coat at an earlier juncture.

Despite the noir-ish overtones loaned by the corpse and the weary, sardonic voice-over, the plot is pretty simple: an unemployed screenwriter on the run from his creditors finds himself holed up in a decaying mansion on Sunset Boulevard — the home of Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson), one-time silent screen goddess, now rattling round her rotting mansion, lonely and forgotten. At the time they meet, Norma, assisted by her gimlet-eyed butler (Erich von Stroheim), is burying her pet chimp; a situation vacant Gillis is fated to fill. Desmond has her eye on a comeback, and sets Gillis to work on a screenplay. But slowly their relationship evolves into something strange and vampiric.

On one level, *Sunset Boulevard* is a tapestry of good, bitter jokes at Hollywood's expense. Swanson herself had once been one of the greatest stars of them all but, by the time Wilder cast her, she was working on radio in New York (she was always earmarked for the role of Norma, whereas Montgomery Clift originally had been scheduled to take the Gillis role).

Similarly, von Stroheim had been one of Hollywood's first great filmmakers, but hadn't completed a movie since 1929 as its sole director. Ironically, the film that had ended both their careers, *Queen Kelly* — a Hollywood debacle that still must send shivers down the spines of studio heads — is what Norma and her butler watch, as she ecstatically relives her glory days. (As a further snark at Hollywood's expense, Wilder buries — at the heart of *Sunset Boulevard*'s set-up — the film industry's oldest joke, the one that goes, "Hear about Hollywood's dumbest actress? She screwed the writer.")

Swanson vamps and camps with passion and precision but leavens the arch pantomime with a perfectly judged sliver of pathos. In one beautifully crafted moment, she finds herself on set with Cecil B DeMille, under the impression that the maestro is interested in her ghastly screenplay. (In fact, the on-screen studio is interested in her ancient car as a prop; the chassis they are after is not hers.) As she gazes on, a boom mic descends into shot. Swanson looks at this totem of the coming of sound — which had driven hundreds of silent stars out of the movies — and bats it away with haughty contempt.

But if Swanson's turn is mesmerising, Holden's is the more complex piece of acting. His Gillis is a man at war with himself, a sap with enough pride to know that he has become a kept man, and not enough moral fibre to escape his feathered nest. As with Wilder's *The Apartment* and *The Fortune Cookie*, it's the undertow of sleaze and moral rot that gives the jokes their distinctive tinge of umami: a cynical succulence totally at odds with Hollywood's insistence that its movies provide moral nourishment for their audiences.

**"THE UNDERTOW OF SLEAZE AND MORAL ROT GIVES THE JOKES THEIR SUCCULENCE."**

Hollywood, in the shape of MGM head Louis B. Mayer, was furious at the sheer impropriety of it all and sharp enough to spot when his feeding hand was being bitten. "You bastard!" he yelled at Wilder after seeing the film for the first time. "You have disgraced the industry that made you and fed you! You should be tarred and feathered and run out of town!"

Wilder shot back a riposte identical to the one that *Sunset Boulevard* delivers to Hollywood itself.

"Go shit in your hat," he said.

**ADAM SMITH**

# Stalag 17

## Billy Wilder's bittersweet POW drama packs an emotional punch

**1953** / CERT **PG** / DIRECTOR **BILLY WILDER** / SCREENWRITERS **BILLY WILDER, EDWIN BLUM** / CAST **WILLIAM HOLDEN, DON TAYLOR, OTTO PREMINGER**

ON THE NIGHT of 11 September, 2001, with the American public traumatised by the terrible events of the day, the featured movie on one of the major TV networks was Billy Wilder's World War II drama *Stalag 17*. It was pure coincidence, having been scheduled far in advance of the terrorist attacks, but it proved notably popular. In a state of collective shock, Americans were, it seems, comforted by an old-fashioned, patriotic yarn drawn from a conflict in which they had ultimately triumphed. Far from the flag-waving, blood-and-thunder jingoism of many Hollywood war films, it was seen as a gentle, even humorous, reminder that character and strong values can vanquish the most pernicious of evils.

Which is somewhat, if not wholly, at odds with the film's true nature. Adapted by Wilder from the Broadway play by Donald Bevan and Edmund Trzcinski (based on their experiences in a German POW camp), *Stalag 17* might have mellowed over the years, but it is still quite as caustic as anything he ever devised. Set in the titular prisoner-of-war camp, a facility inhabited by US Air Force sergeants, it begins with an attempted escape by two inmates of Barracks 4, Manfredi and Johnson — an attempt coolly predicted by Sgt JJ Sefton (William Holden) to fail. So confident is Sefton, in fact, that he's prepared to bet two packs of cigarettes on the outcome. Sure enough, Manfredi and Johnson are mown down by prison guards lying in wait for them at the mouth of the tunnel. Not surprisingly, this raises suspicions that there is a rat in the barracks — suspicions that, given his apparent foreknowledge of the escape and open trading with the Germans, fall squarely on Sefton.

What follows is the classic POW flick, replete with escape plots, buffoonish guards, a sadistic commandant, camaraderie, conflict and a terrific twist ending — part thriller, part comedy, part detective story. It also boasts an unforgettable rogues' gallery of supporting characters, notably Otto Preminger as Commandant Colonel Oberst von Scherbach, Robert Strauss as Sgt Stanislaus 'Animal' Kuzawa, and Sig Ruman as Sgt Johann Sebastian Schulz; a great performance by Holden in the lead; and, of course, Wilder's sly, sardonic take on human nature and legendarily mordant wit.

As usual it was a concoction that precious few, save Wilder, had much love for in its formative stages. The play had been a big hit in New York, eventually running to almost 500 performances, but true to form, Wilder was determined his script would have more bite, darkening the humour and upping the dramatic stakes. In particular, he wanted Sefton to be truly dislikable — in an early scene, for instance, where he refutes the charge of treachery, he is ostentatiously frying himself a fresh egg procured from the Germans.

The role of Sefton was originally written with Charlton Heston in mind, but Heston backed off when Wilder chose to make the character even less heroic. Kirk Douglas passed for similar reasons (he didn't even like the play, apparently), and the part ended up at Holden's door. At that point, Holden, who had excelled in Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* three years earlier, was the director's number one choice. Holden, however, had other ideas. He hated the play even more than Douglas, allegedly walking out in disgust after the first act. Still, either forced by Paramount under the terms of his contract, or succumbing to Wilder's powers of persuasion (accounts differ), he eventually accepted. Which is not to say he was happy about it. Throughout the production he complained bitterly to Wilder about Sefton's character, aggrieved at having to play such a louse less than ten years after the end of the war. He implored Wilder to make Sefton more sympathetic; Wilder declined. He



was right to do so. Holden won the 1953 Oscar for Best Actor, an award he accepted with what was, up to then, the shortest speech in the Academy's history, a brusque, "Thank you." It was brevity born not of disrespect but of necessity. The TV broadcast of the ceremony was running long, and he was in danger of being cut off entirely. Later Holden took out full-page ads in *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter*, showering fulsome

**"STALAG 17 IS STILL QUITE AS CAUSTIC AS ANYTHING WILDER EVER DEVISED."**



The inmates of *Stalag 17*, including William Holden's Sefton (centre-rear), tune into the BBC. No, really.

praise on his collaborators.

*Stalag 17* premiered in New York on 1 July, 1953, and went on to become one of the biggest hits of Wilder's career, taking over $10 million at the international box office. It did nothing to swell Wilder's personal fortunes, however. Expecting a major pay day, he was informed by Paramount that since his last picture for them, *Ace In The Hole*, had bombed, the loss would be deducted from *Stalag 17*'s profits, thus wiping out his back end.

Wilder parted ways with Paramount shortly afterwards, although it was not financial double-dealing that prompted his break with the studio. Rather, it was over a point of principal that rather undercuts the reputation he had of being a die-hard cynic.

By the 1950s, West Germany was an important overseas market for Hollywood and it was suggested to Wilder by a Paramount executive that, to maximise *Stalag 17*'s box-office potential there, he make the camp guards Polish. Wilder, whose mother and stepfather had perished at Auschwitz, was incensed. He refused point-blank, furiously demanding an apology from the executive. When none was forthcoming, he took his business — and his genius — elsewhere. **SIMON BRAUND**

# On The Waterfront

## The whistleblower's lament

**1954** / CERT **PG** / DIRECTOR **ELIA KAZAN** / SCREENWRITER **BUDD SCHULBERG** / CAST **MARLON BRANDO, KARL MALDEN, LEE J COBB, ROD STEIGER, EVA MARIE SAINT**

WHEN *ON THE Waterfront* swept the Academy Awards in 1955, director Elia Kazan seemed vindicated. He'd gone through a rough patch with conservative Americans because of his one-time membership of the Communist Party, and become a high-profile hate figure for both his former comrades and liberals appalled by the witch-hunts of the McCarthy era because he had appeared as a "friendly" witness at the House Un-American Activities Commission hearings. Kazan maintained to his dying day that he testified out of a sincere belief that the American Communist Party was a threat to the country, but the suspicion that he'd "named names" to preserve his career remained for the rest of his life; when, at the 1999 Oscars, he was given a lifetime award, many refused to applaud. Certainly, *On The Waterfront* was made at an uneasy time for America, when the mood was edgy and paranoid.

The film began life as a series of magazine articles by Malcolm Johnson which exposed racketeering in New York's dockyards. In 1951, Kazan hired playwright Arthur Miller to research a script called *The Hook*, using material from the articles. However, Miller (who went on to pen anti-witch-hunt play *The Crucible*) backed out when Columbia boss Harry Cohn insisted the union in the story be run not by gangsters but by evil commies. Of course, despite Miller's departure, this change was never made — the Red angle was dropped because by the time the movie was in production, no one involved wanted to hear the word "communist" ever again. To replace Miller, Kazan turned to novelist Budd Schulberg — another recent "friendly" witness with cause to dislike his old comrades (the Party censured his novel *What Makes Sammy Run?* as "not progressive enough"). Together, they crafted a picture which begins as a journalistic gangster movie but ends up as a deeply effective story of betrayal and redemption.

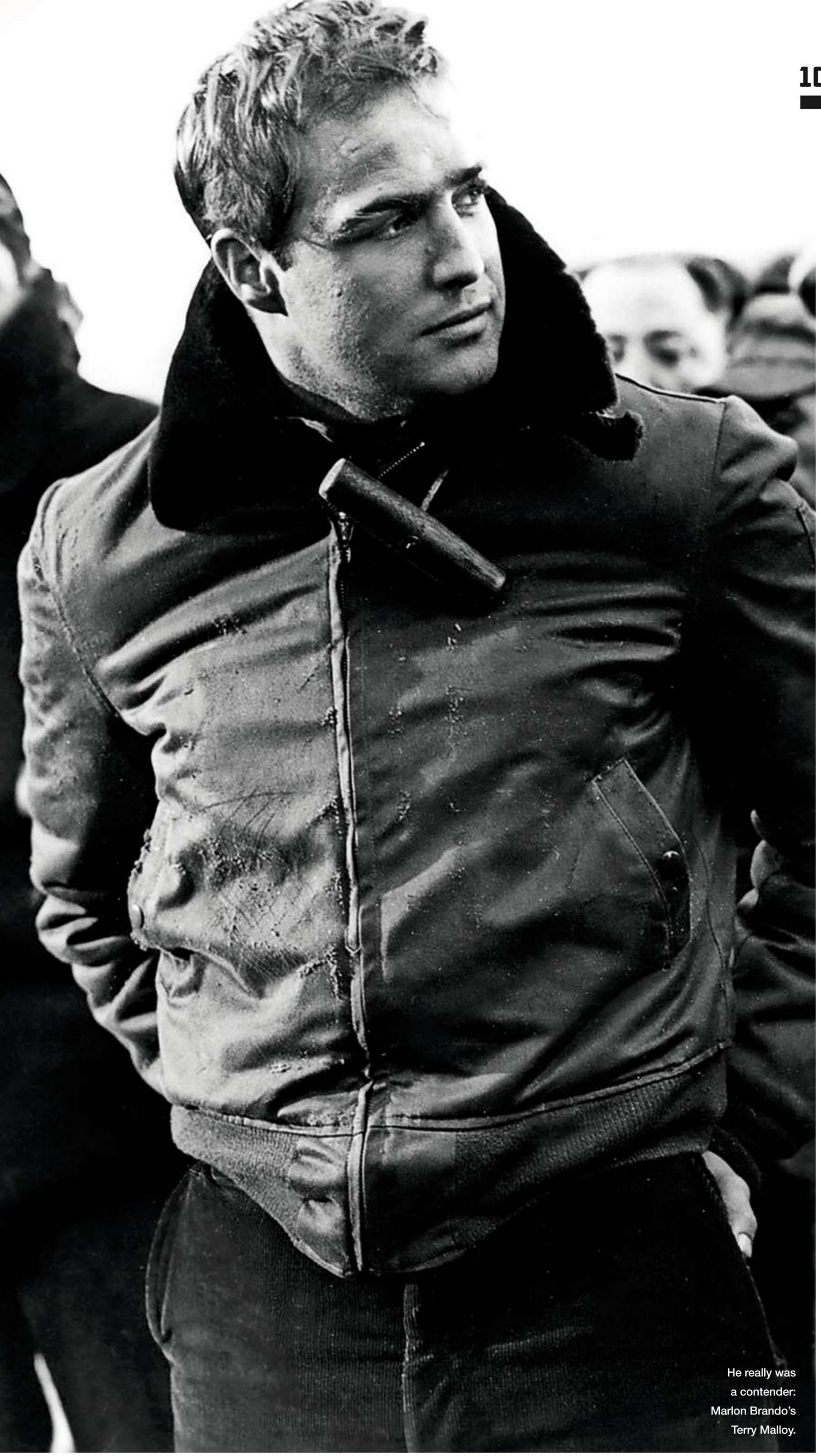
In the early 1950s, a new feature was added to the crime scene: the televised Congressional inquiry, in which crusading politicians went after enemies of society (organised crime, violent comic books, anyone who had ever met a communist). Earlier gangland dramas might have had *On The Waterfront*'s dock racket busted by a dedicated cop or district attorney, but the flatfoots of this movie (Leif Erickson and a very young Martin Balsam) work for a Congressional crime commission. Their job is not catching crooks in the act, but finding witnesses to testify against union boss bully Johnny Friendly (Lee J Cobb, wrth a doubly ironic character name — the actor was yet another "friendly" witness at HUAC).

The code of the waterfront is "D and D... Deaf and dumb", and the film shows longshoremen who hate anyone who rats even more than the bosses who humiliate them as they mill about hoping for a day's work. In the opening, Terry Molloy (Marlon Brando), an ex-boxer, whose brother Charley (Rod Steiger) is Johnny's smart lawyer, helps dupe a potential informer onto a roof on the assumption Johnny's hoods will be able to talk him out of testifying. After the boy is thrown to his death, Terry finds his loyalties under siege from a two-fisted priest (Karl Malden) and the dead youth's sister (Eva Marie Saint), finally realising, "I've been ratting on myself my whole life."

Like several great '50s films, from *High Noon* to *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers*, *On The Waterfront* deals in paranoia as a whole society turns against a hero who wants to do the right thing. After he gives evidence, Terry finds his beloved birds slaughtered by the kid who used to admire him — a massacre which



**"*ON THE WATERFRONT* WAS A COMMERCIAL HIT AND AN OSCAR MAGNET BECAUSE IT HAD GRIT, GUTS AND HEART."**



He really was a contender: Marlon Brando's Terry Malloy.

upsets him even more than the murder of his brother.

Brando's sensitive, beautiful Terry is in contrast to the shifty, sweaty "squealers" gunned down by Humphrey Bogart in earlier gangster films. The crisis for Terry comes when he rethinks his loyalty to people who think nothing of betraying him for a quick profit. The "coulda been a contender" scene in the back of a cab, which won Brando the Oscar he did turn up to accept, reveals that Terry's boxing career ended with "a one-way ticket to Palookaville" because Charley ordered him to throw a fight so Friendly could win a big bet.

In this scene, the actors change what might have been just another torn-from-the-headlines crime movie into a film about one man's family troubles. The scene has been parroted so often, notably by Robert De Niro in *Raging Bull*, and so hailed as a masterclass of Method acting, it's astonishing it remains as fresh as it does. Brando and Steiger underplay rather than try for bigger-than-life effects: this is about things neither brother wants out in the open, but which just have to be said. Rather than launch into his "big speech", Brando lets it leak out heartbreakingly, and Steiger (whose character essentially makes a decision to commit suicide when he sees how his brother really feels) is numbed by what he learns. It's so great a scene that it takes several viewings before you notice that — thanks to producer Sam Spiegel being cheap — there isn't even a process shot of the street through the rear window (which has a venetian blind!) and that the back-of-the-cab set is as fake as anything from a Monogram B picture.

*On The Waterfront* was a commercial hit and an Oscar magnet because it had grit, guts and heart — it went out into the real world and showed new, exciting personalities (Saint, in her debut, is astonishing). At some level we are clearly being asked to sympathise with squealers everywhere, and yet whatever you think of Kazan, *Waterfront* remains a classic because, with its political and criminal context now reduced to footnotes, it's still an emotional powerhouse of a movie, as romantic as it is realist, as tender as it is hard-hitting. **ADAM SMITH**

# The Wages Of Fear

## Road to perdition

**1953** / CERT **PG** /
DIRECTOR
**HENRI-GEORGES CLOUZOT** /
SCREENWRITERS
**HENRI-GEORGES CLOUZOT, JÉRÔME GÉRONIMI** / CAST
**YVES MONTAND, CHARLES VANEL, FOLCO LULLI, PETER VAN EYCK, VERA CLOUZOT**



REPUTATIONS CAN BE a tricky burden. Take director Henri-Georges Clouzot, who was forced to lump the deafening sobriquet 'The French Hitchcock' about with him by babbling critics. History, the cruellest of all reporters, has it that Hitch was so perturbed by this foreign pretender to his exalted position as Master Of Suspense that he rushed *Psycho* into production to pre-empt Clouzot's adaptation of Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac's nervy novel *Les Diaboliques*, the rights to which Hitch had been beaten by a matter of hours. A matter of irritation exacerbated by the fact he had recently transformed their novel *Vertigo* into a verifiable masterpiece.

Yet anyone sizing up Clouzot's work as an equivalent, a rival, to Hitchcock's devilry — as precisely calibrated as Swiss clockwork — may be perplexed to find that this so-called French version is a far more elemental, naturalistic and philosophical filmmaker. As for the claim that his own masterpiece, *The Wages Of Fear*, is among the most thrilling (it's worth gauging every sense of that word) movies ever created, you might be surprised to discover something quite as spare, cruel, visceral and, well, slow as this unsurpassed exercise in the sheerness of filmmaking. A film literally on edge.

Clouzot gives the dynamics of movie action the tensile ache of a piano string. At every pluck our nerves jangle brutally, its note bleak, penetrating and roughly atonal. Cut adrift from any form of sentiment, you can't love *The Wages Of Fear*; you can only cope with it. Any humour is as black as the slurps of oil at the crux of the plot. It's a singular beast, more macho than its moody French upbringing might suggest, but Hollywood could never hope to equal its nihilism and frankness, nor the punishment of its later stages. It did, after all, try with William Friedkin's oafish redo, *Sorcerer*.

But the original 1953 film, based on the novel by Georges Arnaud, certainly has its American heritage. Clouzot had drunk in not only Hitchcock's tightrope operas, but also the flinty narratives of film noir, and Bogart's cynical machismo in *The Treasure Of The Sierra Madre*. In a sweaty, hard-scrabble South American nowhere named Las Piedras, four desperate men are charged with a seemingly simple operation by the sole local employers: imperialistic American bloodsuckers, the Southern Oil Company. In order to extinguish a well-head fire, they must deliver two trucks, loaded with vials of nitroglycerin clinking away like milk bottles, to snuff out the flames. All that stands between them and the oil field is an uncivilised mountain road, rutted and perilously snaky, where one jolt too many will be the end of them.

The risk is less an explosion than a terrifying form of utter eradication as if they had never existed, right down to the truck's rusty bolts.

The journey becomes a procession of Herculean challenges to both driver and vicarious watcher: a crumbling

**"IT'S AMONG THE MOST THRILLING FILMS EVER CREATED: SPARE, CRUEL, VISCERAL, A FILM LITERALLY ON EDGE."**



"Oil as glutinous as blood." Yves Montand's Mario (right) offers solace to Charles Vanel's Jo.

stretch of road that must be coasted at exactly 40mph (65km); a hairpin bend that can only be negotiated by reversing over the frail remnants of a bridge; a huge boulder, blocking passage; and a plunge, wheel-deep, into a pool of oil as thick and glutinous as blood. Each of these tests is pored over by a Clouzot fascinated by the dire pragmatism of detail. Sequences play out painfully slowly, cross-cutting between the surgical intricacy of the action and close-ups of the protagonists' taut faces. Over an extraordinary passage of sustained tension, the images, clammy with sweat, gain a rudimentary gut-level impact, an anti-intellectual force.

To confound matters, this quartet of hard-bitten heroes proves anything but: they are mocking, distant and unsympathetic, a brotherhood in peril alone. Quietly stagnating among this clutch of hovels, Yves Montand's Mario, the central protagonist, has something of Bogart's lounging superiority, a disdainful cigarette permanently dangling from his lips. More enigmatic is Charles Vanel's Jo, a Parisian bully with a head shaped like a bulldog and a neck as thick as a log, who will ultimately be found lacking in mettle and described pithily as "an Al Capone with cold feet". His transformation into a weakling is a vitally honest piece of work. In the other truck are the jovial but doomed Luigi (Folco Lulli) and his Germanic partner Bimba (Peter Van Eyck). There are hints, no more than teases, of homosexual undertones, or at the very least a collective misogyny — the only woman to make any impression, Linda (played by Clouzot's wife, Vera), is a sap for their games and marks a blurry point of redemption for the unholy Mario.

What also distorts the film's excitable rep is the fact that for the first hour very little happens. The film starts in an airless doldrum, the opening shot symbolically featuring a huddle of children torturing cockroaches for kicks (as appropriated by Sam Peckinpah for *The Wild Bunch*). The heated lethargy of the place feels pestilential, as if hopelessness were a contagious disease. Clouzot had planned to use Spain for this South American purgatory, but Montand refused while fascist ruler Franco remained in power. The Camargue region of southern France substituted, but the shoot, somehow inevitably, was fraught with difficulty. Over two years, through Clouzot's frail health and Montand shattering his ankle-bone, the film was heaved into existence as if possessed of a great inner weight.

Thematically, it is. It was initially accused of anti-Americanism in its depiction of colonial rape. Early US versions were butchered of pointedly anti-corporate scenes, and the film described as "one of the most evil ever made" by *Time* magazine in 1955. But Clouzot is more interested in exploring abstract ideas than the heavy tread of politics. The film is, in truth, anti-everything. Great spurts of existential angst spasm out of the film like oil out of dry rock, while its cold, cruel ending, snuffing out hope as swiftly as the well-head flames, would leave audiences mulling over a night out staring into abysses both literal and spiritual. And this is years ahead of the bleak chic of *Taxi Driver* or *Apocalypse Now*.

The director's gloomy world-view is of man's self-destructiveness, of life's capricious nature, of the godless universe in which we dangle so precariously. Humankind has let Clouzot down with its lack of essential decency — World War II still held a cloud over his thoughts. Ours is a rough-hewn road to nowhere.

He must have been a riot at parties.

**IAN NATHAN**

## ESSENTIAL CLOUZOT

### THE RAVEN (1943)

Made during the occupation of France and funded by a company with pro-Nazi interests, Clouzot's notorious thriller was banned in his country as anti-French propaganda and allegedly had him threatened with execution. Time — and heavyweight fans including Jean Cocteau and Jean-Paul Sartre — has redeemed this tale of a mysterious writer as a powerful piece of anti-informant commentary.

### QUAI DES ORFEVRES (1947)

Clouzot bounced back from his blacklisting with this vibrant crime thriller set in the bustling music halls of Paris in the 1940s. Hugely popular, it would also influence many of the younger French auteurs emerging in the following decade.

### LES DIABOLIQUES (1955)

The film that Hitchcock coveted — and regarded as the direct precursor to *Psycho* — is one of the all-time great thrillers, as two women murder a sadistic headmaster only to discover the corpse has vanished. Not to be confused with the inferior 1996 remake, starring Sharon Stone.

### HELL (1994)

The great film he never made; Clouzot began shooting this story of a hotel manager's descent into madness in 1964, but suffered a heart attack and couldn't complete it. His widow sold the story to New Wave thriller maestro Claude Chabrol, who realised it in 1994.



# Rear Window

**Alfred Hitchcock's finest hour found him playing God with the audience's complicit gaze...**

**1954** / CERT **PG** / DIRECTOR **ALFRED HITCHCOCK** / SCREENWRITER **JOHN MICHAEL HAYES** / CAST **JAMES STEWART, GRACE KELLY, WENDELL COREY**

IT MIGHT BE overstating the case, but *Rear Window* could be perfect. Eminent director, critic and true-blue Hitchcock geek François Truffaut certainly thought so: "I am convinced that this film is one of those rare films without imperfection or weakness, which concedes nothing," he gushed effusively in some learned journal or other. But perfection is an odd, almost unlikeable quality to boast about. It doesn't feel human, it feels cold and untouchable, and Hitchcock's work simmers with human imperfection. You could boil down every one of his effervescent ideas — he had an intellectual rigour as athletic as his body was lethargic — to that one concept: what is it to be human? His answers, however, do not make encouraging reading: the impulse to murder is as ready as the impulse to love. And doesn't murder make for better movies?

Ostensibly this is a film about a man who doesn't want to marry Grace Kelly. Surely a working definition of a malfunctioning psyche, but in the mind of Alfred The Great, it is exactly the point. Everything in LB Jefferies' (known simply as Jeff and played with chipped wholesomeness by James Stewart) world rebounds off this paranoia — the potential cluttering of his freedom. How perfectly symbolic, then, that his leg is bound in a plaster cast after stepping too close to capture a sizzling still of a race-car crash. Hitch has him impotent, gazing lazily out of his window at the quadrangle of apartments where he lives, a confined world in which murder will fester.

Indeed, Lars Thorwald's (Raymond Burr) intention to kill his wife works as a ghoulish emblem of exactly what Jeff fears of marriage: morbid suffocation to which the inevitable outcome is to slice and dice one's spouse and bury her in the rose garden, not taking into account the prying nose of local pooches. Amateur murder will invite amateur detection, and the wheelchair prone Jeff will enlist his long-suffering fiancée Lisa (Kelly) to pursue his hunches in person. She's game this girl, you've got to give her that.

What everyone knows, enshrined as it is in film folklore, is that the movie was made on a single, multistorey set, and marks the largest percentage of thrills



Nosey neighbours: LB 'Jeff' Jefferies (James Stewart) and Lisa (Grace Kelly) think something fishy's going on.

**"IS MURDER THE TRUE CLAIM OF CINEMA ON OUR SHADOWY HEARTS — TO FEED OUR VOYEURISTIC LONGINGS? HITCHCOCK HAS IT ALL IN FOCUS FOR US."**

to the smallest number of locations of any Hollywood movie ever. Can you imagine someone pitching it now?

Hitchcock was obsessed with testing his own genius. To impose challenges on narrative freedom — how do you concoct a thriller where your protagonist remains stationary? How can a movie thrive when it can barely move? With *Rope*, *Lifeboat* and *Dial M For Murder* (his first film with Kelly), the director was rapt with the idea of sustaining tension within a confined space. They count as dry runs (even the sodden *Lifeboat*) for *Rear Window*, the culmination of this exploration — a single set, the camera never leaving the point-of-view (well, almost) of our apartment-bound hero (although he does very little that is evidently heroic). It is, of course, an extension of our position, ensconced in the cinema, watching, worrying, waiting, wanting...

The set was a wonder to behold. At the cost of $100,000, it is design perfectly melded with narrative. The courtyard set measured 30m wide, 56m long and 12m high, and consisted of 31 apartments, eight of which were completely furnished, including running water and electricity.

In a certain compact sense, *Rear Window* is a fascinating film about New York: that sense of overcrowding, garrets stacked one on top of another like a termite mound somewhere in the overpopulated Greenwich Village. But then, it is also a world within a world, a place from the movies. And Hitchcock was a master of this space. His shots were co-ordinated to the inch, setting up action along ever deepening planes as the camera's view penetrates the courtyard. Harking back to his silent beginnings, he reads the various rooms as snapshots of mood — by visuals alone we can perceive the nature of each comic strip, a darkening set of tales.

The storyline can be loosely traced to a short story by Cornell Woolrich, adapted by John Michael Hayes, who added a sophisticated whimsy and sexual giddiness that hadn't been present in Hitch's work since *The 39 Steps*; the lithe moves of screwball comedy draped over a thriller. In one pass of the script, there was to be sexual tension between Jeff and Lisa, where she had been unwilling to sleep with him until they were married. Hitchcock was uninterested in such coyness, and the film remains obsessed by the carnal act. Provoking the Hays Code, a merry dance he would continue through *Psycho*, Hitchcock has no foibles about having Lisa declare she will stay over; the suggestion being their relationship has long since been consummated. Her entrance into the movie is a magical flourish of eroticism, as she walks straight toward camera, culminating in the shudder of a double exposure as if the shot itself was reaching orgasm.

The most important apartment, of course, belongs to the Thorwalds, where the wife's mysterious disappearance will become Jeff's — and our — obsession. People have read Thorwald's portly, bespectacled guise as a sly dig at Hitchcock's former boss, David O Selznick. But beyond a childish gibe, Thorwald is a humdrum ghoul. He is the ordinary man driven to ordinary murder. His motivation is exasperation, emptiness and claustrophobia. As the film claws to its close, he confronts Jeff, but appears less as a villain than a victim.

Where *Vertigo* sported its deviancy on the surface, *Rear Window* possesses a more wicked intent: we're all in this horrid game together. It's been cited as Hitch's most pessimistic story, and there's something in that. The film's grandest conjecture is ultimately nothing to do with Jeff or Lisa or desperate Thorwald, but us, at home with our players, or in the dark, sticky realm of the cinema. Why do we crave murder? Is that the true claim of cinema on our shadowy hearts — to feed our voyeuristic longings? Hitchcock has it all in focus for us: the titillation of ogling errant neighbours; the lurid satisfactions of peeping like Toms; and the vicarious fulfilment of murderous lust. There is a moral test in this, almost a fatherly chiding. Notice that the film opens and closes with the raising and lowering of a blind like a theatrical curtain. Yet, who is the perpetrator of this simple act? At the opening Jeff is seen asleep alone. The answer is simple — God, or, more specifically, Alfred Hitchcock. **IAN NATHAN**

# The Night Of The Hunter

## A preacher who won't turn the other cheek

**1969** / CERT **12** / DIRECTOR **CHARLES LAUGHTON** / SCREENWRITER **JAMES AGEE** / CAST **ROBERT MITCHUM, SHELLEY WINTERS, LILLIAN GISH**

IN THE SPRING of 1954 Charles Laughton, the distinguished British actor most famous for his portrayal of Captain Bligh in 1935's *Mutiny On The Bounty*, was in early preparations for his debut as a film director. In pursuit of a suitable leading man, he placed a call to Robert Mitchum, then serving out the final months of his contract at RKO. "Bob," said Laughton in his hoity-toity burr, "we have a story here we are hoping to turn into a little film, and I would very much like to talk to you about the leading role. The character is a bit different. He's a terrible, evil shit of a man." "Present," retorted Mitchum.

By the 1950s, Laughton's stock as an actor was waning, but he had found a new lease of life as a theatre director, staging critically acclaimed productions of *Don Juan In Hell* and *The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial* that had earned him comparisons with the young Orson Welles.

Through a New York agent, a friend of his own agent, Paul Gregory, Laughton obtained publishers' galleys of a novel by first-time writer Davis Grubb called *The Night Of The Hunter*, the dark, Depression-era tale of a psychotic serial killer who poses as an itinerant clergyman to prey on vulnerable women. Laughton was immediately struck by the book's eerie, psychologically troubling overtones, deeming it the perfect source material for a picture that would match his stage productions in visual daring and announce him as a director of note.

With the rights to Grubb's novel secured and a deal cemented at United Artists, Laughton set about finding a screenwriter. He initially offered the job to Grubb, who demurred, possibly to Laughton's relief. The Virginia-born author was a tight-lipped eccentric who claimed he was unable to write anywhere but on a train, the only mode of transport he would entertain apart from his bicycle. Instead, Laughton gave the job to James Agee, the legendary critic and novelist whose screen credits included *The African Queen*. Agee, however, well into the last round of his battle with the bottle, proved an even worse choice than Grubb. Constantly smashed on bourbon and prone to day-long crying jags, he eventually turned in a rambling shambles that Laughton completely rewrote, gallantly refusing to take a credit. Agee was dead before the film hit theatres.

The plot of *The Night Of The Hunter* concerns Harry Powell, a switchblade-wielding psychopath with a bent for slicing up loose women in the name of God. After marrying and then murdering a young widow, Powell takes off in murderous pursuit of her two young children, who have escaped his clutches with a stash of stolen money he has been after all along. Laughton's description of Powell — the Preacher — hardly begins to cover it. He is among the most indelible villains ever created, a monstrous conflation of oily charm, warped religious fervour, greed and sexual repression. Powell's quivering abhorrence of sex is the corrosive core of his being: the phallic blade of his flick-knife bursts unbidden through the folds of his trousers while he watches a stripper; unable to consummate his marriage, he slits his wife's throat instead. The demons roiling inside him are expressed in the words "LOVE" and "HATE", tattooed across his knuckles. Laughton believed there was only one actor who could bring him to the screen; Mitchum agreed. They were both right. And when Laurence Olivier, no less, showed an interest in the role, even United Artists stated they would do the picture with no-one but Bob Mitchum.

The Preacher's doomed bride, Willa, was played by Shelley Winters, a late substitute for Betty Grable. In the role of Powell's nemesis, Miss Rachel, the kindly old woman who gives the children sanctuary, Laughton cast Lillian Gish. Laughton was overjoyed to have Gish on board. He was adamant that *Hunter*'s visual style would buck the prevailing



**"LAUGHTON'S UNIQUE, HAUNTING FILM PROVOKED ASTONISHMENT IN EVERYONE."**



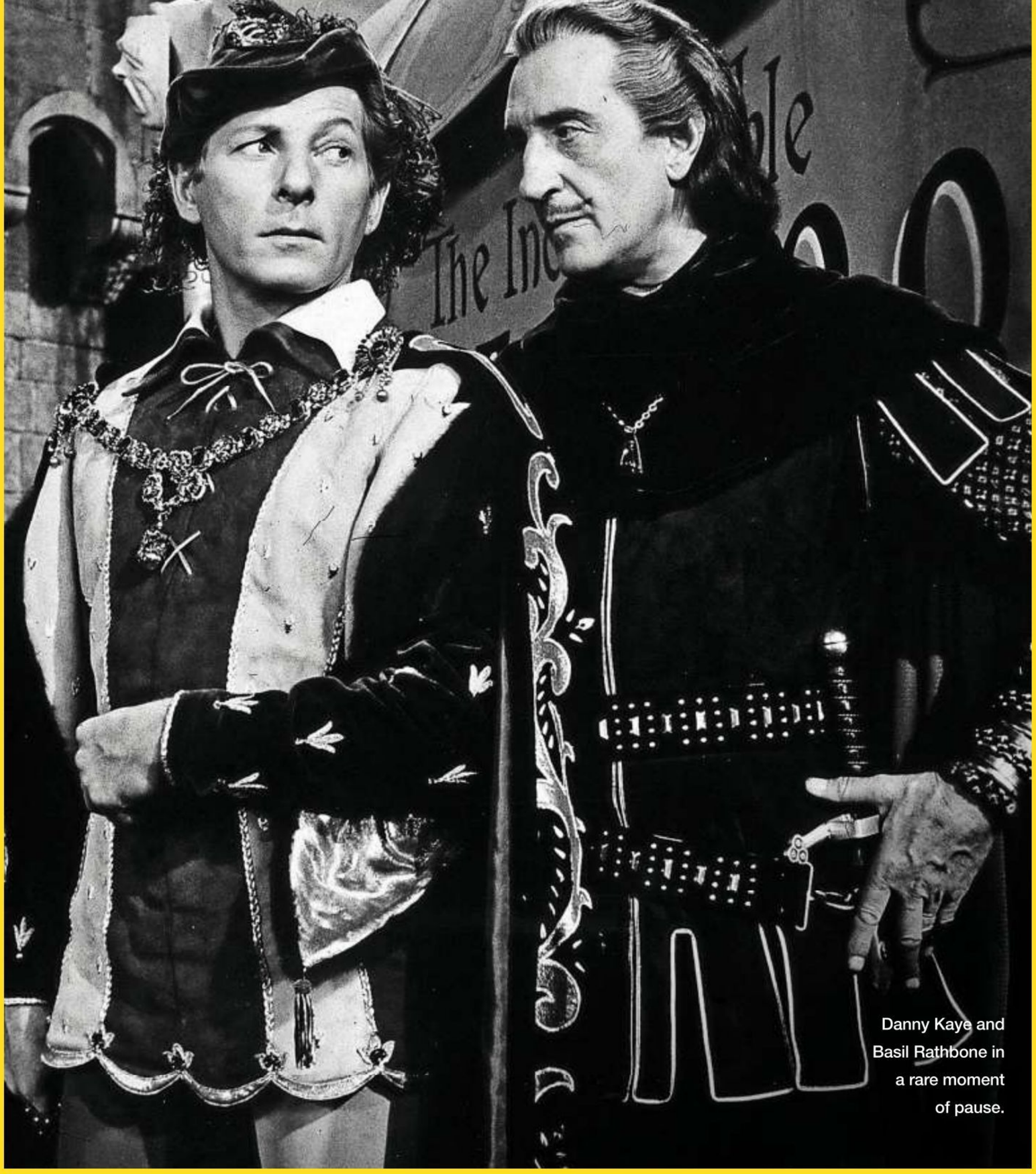
Robert Mitchum as serial killer Harry Powell.

trend for naturalism and draw its inspiration from silent cinema, principally the films of DW Griffith, with whom Gish had shared a close creative bond. She enthralled him with stories of her tenure as DW's muse, later claiming that working with Laughton was the most exhilarating experience she'd had since her days with Griffith. For his cinematographer Laughton chose Stanley Cortez, another old hand brought low by the industry, who had done brilliant work on Welles' *The Magnificent Ambersons*.

The result of this collaboration was a film of exquisitely evocative power. On the surface a sinister Manichean fairy tale bathed in looming black-and-silvery pearlescence, it fuses elements of Victorian melodrama, noir thriller, European expressionism and the Brothers Grimm with the high-strung Southern Gothic of Grubb's novel and a feel for the bleakness of its Depression-era setting that rivals Steinbeck. Add to that the film's disquieting dark humour and the luminescent beauty of even its most terrible moments — Willa's corpse, lit by shafts of sunlight, serenely interred at the bottom of the river, her throat agape, her hair wafting like silky tendrils of seaweed — and it still manages to be more than the sum of its myriad parts.

*The Night Of The Hunter* also showcases the finest performance of Robert Mitchum's career, which is saying something. The Preacher exhibits not one iota of the deceptively laconic, sleepy-eyed detachment that was Mitchum's customary approach. Powell is, instead, a litany of fire-and-brimstone hamminess shot through with prat-falling buffoonery that shouldn't work on any level, even in this hothouse setting, but somehow does, and brilliantly so, setting the benchmark for the creepy-man-of-God archetype that you can bet Paul Dano studied before he started work on *There Will Be Blood*.

Laughton's unique, haunting film achieved exactly what he had intended, provoking astonishment in everyone. Sadly, *The Night Of The Hunter* was a colossal failure with audiences and critics alike, and Laughton, his spirit crushed, never directed another film. **SIMON BRAUND**



Danny Kaye and Basil Rathbone in a rare moment of pause.

# The Court Jester

**A riotous brew of mime, japery and exquisite wordplay**

**1955** / CERT **U** / DIRECTORS **MELVIN FRANK, NORMAN PANAMA** / SCREENWRITERS **MELVIN FRANK, NORMAN PANAMA** / CAST **DANNY KAYE, GLYNIS JOHNS, BASIL RATHBONE**

*THE COURT JESTER* is one of the funniest, most joyous films ever made. It's a romantic musical comedy, a frantic farce executed with clockwork precision, and a spoof historical adventure that satirises the swashbuckling genre so well that it's far finer than most of the films it sends up.

The film was written, produced and directed (in Technicolor and pioneering wide-screen format VistaVision) specifically for Kaye, hitting his peak of comic genius, by light-entertainment workhorses Norman Panama and Melvin Frank. Writing partners since college, they got their big break writing radio material for Bob Hope. Their film work together includes Hope and Bing Crosby pictures, the excellent Cary Grant vehicle *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* (1948), and *White Christmas* (1954) for Crosby and Kaye. In this, their greatest achievement, content and intent are laid out immediately by Kaye, resplendent in jester costume, interacting with the opening credits to herald the film's tone and text in the opening song, *Life Could Not Better Be*. Written for him by his wife Sylvia Fine and Frank Sinatra's main man, Sammy Cahn, its lyrics marry up to the passing credits.

The song's claim that, "Plot we got, quite a lot," is an understatement for the convoluted goings-on. Usurper Roderick The Tyrant (Parker) has slaughtered the royal family and claimed the throne of England with the connivance of his henchman-advisor, Lord Ravenhurst (Rathbone). Kaye plays Hubert Hawkins, a kind, gentle carnival performer and member of a band of loyalist rebels keen to oust Roderick and reinstate the rightful heir, an orphaned infant whose pedigree is verified by the distinctive hereditary royal birthmark — a purple pimpernel — on his baby bottom. The outlaws are led by the daring hero The Black Fox, modelled on Errol Flynn's Robin Hood.

Their hideout betrayed, Hawkins and feisty rebel captain Maid Jean (Johns), disguised as grandfather and mute maiden, set out to deliver the royal babe to the safety of a monastery. But after they cross paths with the Incomparable Giacomo, King Of Jesters And Jester Of Kings (John Carradine), who is bound for Roderick's court, they see a way to overthrow the king: an intimate can find the key to a secret passage between castle and forest, allowing the rebels in for a surprise attack. So Hawkins becomes 'Giacomo'. Naturally, it's not that simple. Jean is captured by the king's men and is delivered to Roderick. Unaware of her situation, 'Giacomo' meanwhile mistakes Ravenhurst for the rebel confederate already in the court. He is also unaware that Ravenhurst has employed 'Giacomo', really a notorious assassin, to murder his three rivals for the king's favour. To add more layers of consternation, Hawkins/'Giacomo' catches the eye of Princess Gwendolyn (Lansbury), who is unwillingly to be betrothed to Sir Griswold The Grim, Grisly And Gruesome. She is persuaded by her maid, the witch Griselda (Natwick), that the jester is the lover of her dreams. The sorceress puts a spell on Hawkins: at a snap of the fingers he is transformed into an assured fighter, lover and general doer of derring-do. In some of the most celebrated comedic sequences ever, Kaye switches personalities back and forth at successive snaps, his mime skills superb as he twitches from terror or bewilderment to suavity and arrogance.

If the film has three 'acts', the first sets it in motion, letting romance blossom, and introducing characters whose significance will become clear later. The second is the success of the 'Giacomo' masquerade at court amid the aristocrats' dastardly schemes. The third, in which 'Giacomo' is unmasked and seemingly undone, doomed to be served up to Sir Griswold in a joust to the death, is utterly, brilliantly hysterical. Panama and Frank increase the pace until the last half-hour is a breathless series of gymnastics, japes, tongue-twisitng wordplay and excitement.

The film absolutely lives up to the opening song's promise that, "What starts like a scary tale ends like a fairy tale and life couldn't possibly better be." And nor could an ingenious, supremely performed laugh riot better be. **ANGIE ERRIGO**

# Forbidden Planet

## It's Shakespeare in space — and the Bard should be proud

**1956** / CERT **PG** / DIRECTOR **FRED M WILCOX** / SCREENWRITER **CYRIL HUME** / CAST **WALTER PIDGEON, ANNE FRANCIS, LESLIE NIELSEN**

IN 1956, *FORBIDDEN Planet* was not a huge success. It grossed on a par with, say, *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers* or *The Day The Earth Stood Still* — but it cost a lot more than the competition. Furthermore, it dared to mix classical literature, Freudian analysis and mythical symbolism with rayguns, robots and spaceships. It was an oddity, but it would inspire a generation and change the face of science-fiction on film.

For many decades, the suits — whose memory went back to such ruinously expensive epics as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and Alexander Korda's *The Shape Of Things To Come* — kept a low ceiling on science-fiction film budgets. The stereotype was that sci-fi was a "difficult" screen genre, with appeal only to the extremes of the intellectual spectrum. Likely punters were eggheads and kids who loved monsters, while mainstream moviegoers went to *Three Coins In A Fountain* or *The Ten Commandments*.

Of course, some kids were so enraptured by Robby The Robot, the saucer-shaped C-570 and the "monster from the id", that they grew up, got into the movie business and made films which proved earlier studio thinking wrong. *Forbidden Planet* is full of images and ideas that recur in *Star Trek* (a spacefaring vessel run as if it were in the American navy); *2001: A Space Odyssey* (unimaginably superior aliens); *Solaris* (physical beings created by human thought and alien influence); *Star Wars* (robot servants, commonplace space gadgets); and many others.

Over 50 years on, *Forbidden Planet* still looks like the future, though its all-white, all-male, all-American, all-handsome crew of space sailors aren't free of very 1950s ideas (a robot that can vacuum and cook is considered "a housewife's dream"). Less prominent films put spacewomen in positions of authority over men (*Project Moonbase*) or depicted international, multi-racial rocketship crews (*12 To The Moon*), though the default astronaut team of the 1950s (*Conquest Of Space*, *Riders To The Stars*) was resolutely white-bread, military, male. So, of course, were NASA's initial Mercury Seven.

There had been Technicolor science-fiction spectaculars before *Forbidden Planet,* but MGM went the extra mile for CinemaScope. On a vast soundstage, studio technicians created the impressive alien backdrop of Altair-4, with its red desert and green skies. They also filled the screen with classy environments like Morbius' Krel-influenced home, the minimalist interior of the spaceship and the gigantic underground alien machine. As befits a product of the most luxurious studio in town, and perhaps the middle-rank talent of the director oddly chosen as ringmaster (Fred M Wilcox, best known for *Lassie* movies), the film proceeds at a stately pace, very different from the gosh-wow perils of *Flash Gordon*, the only precedent for outer-space adventure on this scale. This allows for a development of the adult themes, as Morbius' virginal daughter, Altaira (Anne Francis), loses her instinctive harmony with nature (petting a tiger) as soon as she responds to the kisses of a horny Earthman. But it also pays off as a sub-plot about a monster builds, becoming the business of the second half.

Irving Block and Allen Adler, who developed the story, and Cyril Hume, who wrote the screenplay, drew on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, which had already been done as a Western (*Yellow Sky*) and was deemed ripe for a science-fiction makeover. Magician Prospero, shipwrecked and exiled, becomes philologist Morbius, sole survivor of an expedition to Altair IV. Prospero's daughter Miranda (Altaira) projects knowing innocence ("What's a bathing suit?"). Ariel, the sprite servant, and Caliban, a misshapen brute, become Robby, a robot designed by someone who had previously worked on washing-machines, and the id monster; an invisible incarnation of Morbius' sub-conscious depicted as a cross between MGM's roaring lion and Warner Bros' Tasmanian Devil. *Forbidden Planet* uses Shakespeare's setting and characters as a springboard for its own plot — which, like almost all sci-fi films, is about the perils of becoming too clever. The crew of the C-570, led by Commander JJ Adams (Leslie Nielsen, when he played stiff heroes rather than sent them up), zoom around the universe in a miracle of technology, but all have an instinctive distrust of getting too far ahead of the game, brain-wise. These folks defer to God rather than science. The film isn't called *Forbidden Planet* for nothing.

For all his good intentions, Morbius is ultimately a Frankenstein who is his own monster and a Dr Jekyll who can externalise his Mr Hyde. Flashing back to *The Bride Of Frankenstein*, and its lever which can blast the laboratory "to atoms", Morbius recants his Krel-worship by activating a simple device which blows up the forbidden planet. Adams, Robby and Altaira survive to witness the blast from space, encapsulating the film's mix of the conservative, the boldly experimental and innocently magical. **KIM NEWMAN**



The all-American crew of the C-570 (Leslie Nielsen third from the left) are held to account by Dr Moebius (Walter Pidgeon) and Robby The Robot.

# Kiss Me Deadly

## Misogyny, torture, Armageddon — the grimmest film noir ever?

**1955** / CERT **12** /
DIRECTOR
**ROBERT ALDRICH** /
SCREENWRITER
**AI BEZZERIDES** /
CAST **RALPH MEEKER, ALBERT DEKKER, PAUL STEWART**

THE FINALE OF *Kiss Me Deadly*, Robert Aldrich's brass-knuckle blast of nihilistic noir, brought down the curtain on the genre's golden age with a bang — a huge nuclear explosion at a Malibu beach house that obliterated the conventions of traditional noir as surely as the payload of the Enola Gay had, a decade before, swept away the city of Hiroshima. It was pulp *Götterdämmerung*.

Adapted from the Mickey Spillane novel by screenwriter AI Bezzerides, *Kiss Me Deadly* is a stunningly bleak and brutal film, at once the apotheosis of the classic noir thriller and its psychotic, aberrant offspring. It has all the mandatory noir trappings in spades — cynical antihero, seductive femme fatale, cheap hoods, intricate plotlines, killer dialogue and plenty of violence — but it pushes all of them to such levels of extremis that they burst the bonds of archetype. Private eye Mike Hammer (Ralph Meeker) isn't just hardboiled; he's positively calcified. A sadistic, mean, corrupt, misogynistic sleazeball who subsists on blackmailing adulterers, both male and female, he is every bit as loathsome and amoral as the criminals he pits himself against. And, drawn into the labyrinth by the torture and murder of an escaped lunatic, Christina Bailey (Cloris Leachman), the destruction he seeks is not merely his own, as the noir model dictates, but that of all mankind.

In the original Spillane novel, the central intrigue hinges on a Mafia conspiracy. In Bezzerides' blistering script, the MacGuffin-to-end-all-MacGuffins ("the great whatsit", as his assistant dubbed it) is a mysterious attaché case that pours forth a deadly light on anyone brave, or foolish, enough to open it. Although it's never made explicitly clear, it's understood that this is some form of thermonuclear device.

The spectre of nuclear apocalypse, and the shroud of pessimism that hangs heavy over proceedings has, inevitably, prompted much debate over *Kiss Me Deadly*'s metaphorical significance — a thinly veiled commentary on Cold War paranoia, a spiritual stepbrother to *Invasion Of The Bodysnatchers* and so on. It's a charge that Bezzerides strenuously denied. "People ask me about the hidden meanings in the script," he once commented in an interview. "About the A-bomb, about McCarthyism... And I can only say that I didn't think about it when I wrote it... I was having fun with it. I wanted to make every scene, every character, interesting." Which is, of course, the screenwriter's primary objective. And although he positioned himself on the left during the probes of the House Committee On Un-American Activities and McCarthy's witch hunts, it seems more likely that Bezzerides, rather than setting out to devise an elaborate atomic-age allegory, simply tapped into the prevailing mood of the country. Still, one can well imagine the impact it had on contemporary audiences, living in the shadow of imminent Armageddon, real or imagined. If nothing else, Bezzerides knew how to up the ante. And if his sinister Pandora's Box was nothing more than an obscure object of desire, it has since proved an enduring one, co-opted — with due reverence — by both Alex Cox in *Repo Man* and Quentin Tarantino in *Pulp Fiction*.

Elsewhere, the film abounds with Bezzerides' faux symbolic flourishes, chiefly Christina's propensity to quote Christina Rossetti, her favourite poet. Pure character embellishment this may be (as Bezzerides claimed), but it nevertheless injects an eerily incongruous note of romance into a film that, in all other respects, takes a lead-tipped cosh to the lyrical fatalism of classic noir. "Remember me," she breathes to Hammer, just before she is tortured to death by a pair of faceless, pliers-wielding thugs.

Robert Aldrich's aggressive directing style does Bezzerides' extraordinary

**"TAKES THE CONVENTIONS OF NOIR AND STRETCHES THEM TO BREAKING POINT."**



Ralph Meeker's Mike Hammer and Marian Carr's 'Friday' contemplate the end of everything.



script full justice, hurtling along at machine-gun pace, jarring images transforming the City Of Angels into a nightmare funhouse that makes the mean streets of Chandler's LA look like Disneyland. In this he finds a worthy ally in cinematographer Ernest Laszlo, whose stark lighting bathes Aldrich's B-movie milieu with the vivid glow of high art, even more astonishing when you consider its reliance on actual locations.

As the film races towards its climax, the only spark of humanity on offer emanates from Hammer's inexplicably faithful secretary, Velda (Maxine Cooper). But there's little in the way of redemption here. Velda's devotion functions primarily as a device to show just what a true heel Hammer is — he uses her as date bait to snare potentially lucrative divorcees, and callously puts her life in peril throughout his self-serving quest to find Christina's killers and unravel the ensuing mystery.

Even without the allegorical overtones, *Kiss Me Deadly* is still a rigorously subversive film. It takes the conventions of noir and stretches them to breaking point and beyond. In the shape of Mike Hammer, it strips out all traces of the essential decency, the personal code of honour, that humanises Philip Marlowe and Sam Spade, creating a morally bankrupt cipher for whom even vengeance is an inadequate call to action. In the guise of a routine, if maniacally stylised, crime thriller, it paints a portrait of man at his most savagely venal. Light years away from the cosy intrigue of *The Maltese Falcon*, the illusive prize at the heart of *Kiss Me Deadly* is not the stuff that dreams are made of, but that from which nightmares spring; a fount of unspeakable dread.

In a gloriously ironic twist, the infamous ending, in which Hammer and Velda perish in the nuclear blast, was imposed on the film by the Catholic League Of Decency, keen as ever to see sinners burn. In the original, Hammer and Velda escape and, as the end credits roll, are shown running towards the sea. For once, the God-botherers got it right. By superimposing the words "The End" over the blazing house, the truncated version seems to suggest that this is not merely the end of the film, but the end of everything. Which is entirely fitting. In the world of *Kiss Me Deadly*, no-one gets out alive. **SIMON BRAUND**

# Rififi

**Sixty years on, the Gallic heist *grand-père* is still a (safe)cracker...**

**1955** / CERT **12** / DIRECTOR **JULES DASSIN** / SCREENWRITERS **JULES DASSIN, RENÉ WHEELER, AUGUSTE LE BRETON** / CAST **JEAN SERVAIS, CARL MÖHNER, ROBERT MANUEL**

IN A ROUNDABOUT way, we have Edward Dmytryk to thank for *Rififi*, the quintessence of French film noir. If he had not ratted out Jules Dassin to the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1951, Dassin would not have relocated to Europe and would never have been offered the job of writing and directing an adaptation of novelist Auguste Le Breton's pulp bestseller, *Du Rififi Chez Les Hommes*. Thus, in turn, he would never have transformed a luridly trashy potboiler into the classiest of crime thrillers and the blueprint for the modern heist movie. Not that Dassin, riding high on such superior American noirs as *The Naked City*, *Thieves' Highway* and *Night And The City*, would have felt any great debt of gratitude. Hounded by HUAC even in Europe, he saw two potential projects derailed before they got off the ground — *L'Ennemi Public Numero Un* foundered when stars Fernandel and Zsa Zsa Gabor pulled out under Red-scare pressure, and filming of Mastro Don Gesualdo in Rome was torpedoed by the US Embassy. Unsurprisingly, when French producer Henri Bérard did offer him *Rififi*, on the back of *The Naked City*'s overseas success, his initial response was a firm, "*Non, merci*."

Dassin was so repulsed by Le Breton's book, its racist overtones and jarring anomalies, that he saw no way of bringing it to the screen — even if he'd wanted to. However, left with dwindling alternatives, Dassin grudgingly accepted the assignment and, with the help of writer René Wheeler, knocked out a script in six days. Financial imperatives aside, the brief time Dassin spent on the script is a reliable indication of his disdain. It was a disdain, however, that paid dividends.

To call Le Breton's novel overcooked would be like describing *Les Misérables* as a bit on the gloomy side. A garlicky Mickey Spillane pastiche, rife with clichés and crude stereotypes, it is a convoluted tale of much dishonour among thieves. Stripping away everything he found either repellent or impossible to shoot, Dassin fashioned a lean, elegantly stylish drama from the turgid mess, focusing tightly on ageing crook Tony le Stéphanois (Jean Servais) and the daring robbery of the Mappin & Webb jewellers he plans with old partners Jo and Mario (Carl Möhner and Robert Manuel) and dapper safecracker César (Dassin). The robbery goes without a hitch, but in its aftermath the forces of human nature come into play — if you guessed there was a woman involved, award yourself an honorary degree from Le Conservatoire de Film Noir Classique — and amid a welter of betrayal and counter-betrayal, the body-count mounts.

The film's most celebrated, influential sequence is the break-in: a nail-biting, perfectly choreographed ballet in which the gang, equipped only with an umbrella to catch the chips of falling plaster, burrow through the ceiling of the jeweller's from the vacant apartment above. It occupies a full quarter of the film's running time and is performed without music or dialogue, the silence ratcheting up the tension and emphasising the thieves' stealth as their most effective weapon. In Le Breton's novel, the heist takes up no more than ten of 250 pages; Dassin lavished so much time on the sequence because he recognised it as both the fulcrum of the story and an acutely cinematic set-piece. He also needed something to fill the gaps left by all the nonsense he would cut out.

One of the things that had so appalled Dassin about Le Breton's book was its casting of the rival gangsters as Arabs, reflecting a pervasive — and, sadly, continuing — strain of racism that blights French society. To his credit, Dassin rejected Bérard's suggestion that he make the bad guys American, not wanting to vent his bitterness so flagrantly; their ethnicity is deliberately left vague. That said, he was careful to include the scene where Tony kills César for betraying his companions. The scene was not featured in the original novel.

*Rififi* was released to almost universal critical acclaim. "Out of the worst crime novels I ever read," gushed François Truffaut, "Jules Dassin has made the best crime film I've ever seen."

It has its detractors, though, and is occasionally criticised for lack of depth, the feeling being that French films of the period have a duty to be more than merely well-crafted and entertaining. Jean-Luc Godard is certainly no fan. "It can't hold a candle to *Touchez Pas Au Grisbi*, which paved the way for it," he wrote in 1986, without the smallest hint of sour grapes (Dassin was as American as apple pie), "let alone *Bob Le Flambeur*, which it paved the way for."

Le Breton had a few misgivings, too. "Where is my book?!" he thundered at Dassin after seeing the film. Eventually Le Breton became so angry that he pulled a gun and slammed it on the table between them. The gesture was so absurdly histrionic that, after a pregnant pause, both men burst out laughing. They became good friends thereafter. Strangely, Dassin never did get around to thanking Dmytryk for ensuring his place in posterity.

**SIMON BRAUND**




Carl Möhner, Jean Servais and Robert Manuel in *Rififi*.



# 12 Angry Men

## The shirty dozen

**1957 /** CERT **U /** DIRECTOR **SIDNEY LUMET /** SCREENWRITER **REGINALD ROSE /** CAST **HENRY FONDA, LEE J COBB, MARTIN BALSAM**

THE TITLE IS probably a little bit of an oversell. Reginald Rose's play isn't really about 12 angry men, more three furious ones and nine given to outbursts brought on by sweaty weather and exasperation. More than that, it's a story about the prejudices, both conscious and subconscious, that underpin every decision we make and our capacity to slough those off. Even more than that, it's a stylish, intense, righteous drama that grabs you with two clammy hands and just keeps squeezing you tighter.

It's clear even to new eyes that this is a work that probably started out as a play. Written by Rose and produced originally as a live TV play in 1954, it's a very theatrical conceit: a jury of 12 men, all residents of New York and all suitably illustrative of a different way of life in that city, are called upon to decide the fate of a man accused of murder. It seems, to most, to be a no-brainer. A man will be condemned to almost certain death, but nobody will have to rearrange their plans for the evening. Except that one man refuses to give the accused the thumbs down, needling the other 11 to look at the evidence a little more closely and think about it with their minds rather than their guts. It's all talk and no action, taking place almost entirely in one room, and gives lots of opportunity for soliloquy, but not, on the surface, a great deal for a film director to play with. Its simplicity of structure makes it a tough gig for a director to do much with, other than simply point a camera at it.

This doesn't feel like the work of a first-time film director. In 1956, Sidney Lumet wasn't an inexperienced director, having had success in TV and theatre, but where he could have rested on skills from those arenas and still produced something perfectly workable, he instead employed very smart tricks to make something tense, yes, but also cinematic. It's a masterwork of both photography and editing. As the film progresses and the tension heightens, Lumet shifts the point-of-view, the faces of the jurors filling more of the frame, so we go from panning casually around the room in the earliest moments to staring intently up at each man's face as everyone grows more and more impassioned. And what faces. The casting is so astute that you could probably successfully describe each juror's personality from a photo. Henry Fonda as the persuasive, unsure Juror #8 is a blank slate, kind eyes and open expression. EG Marshall as Juror #4 has the pinched face of a man who's never made an emotional decision in his life. And Lee J Cobb, with a mug like a battered anvil, could only be the bully. As any good cookbook says, if you're working with only a few ingredients, you'd better make sure they're of the finest quality available.

There are only two moments better suited to the stage: the jurors turning their backs on racist Juror #10 (Ed Begley) and Juror #3's weeping collapse. But those moments are still riveting. It's a powder-keg of a production, ever on the brink of explosion. Lumet was nominated for an Oscar, losing out to David Lean for *The Bridge On The River Kwai*, which, as losses go, is one about which it would be hard to feel aggrieved.

The measure of a classic film is how successfully it plays in any year you watch it. There is nothing about *12 Angry Men* that feels antiquated, except perhaps the lack of Technicolor. If anything, its themes have now taken on a keener sharpness. The core of the film is the laziness of opinion, the righteous leap to a conclusion based on assumed circumstance and a belief that you unswervingly know what's what. Look at newspaper headlines or any frothing Twitter-storm on any given day and you'll find entire nations damned, guilt glibly bestowed and "public outcry" based on unexamined evidence. We assume we know best and cherry-pick the evidence that supports our view. Everybody's an expert on everything and woven from the purest moral fibre.

That's the crux of *12 Angry Men*. Vitally, it's not a story about one man trying to prove the innocence of a defendant while 11 others swing the axe. It's pointedly repeated that Juror #8 isn't certain that the man didn't commit the crime, only that there's nothing in the evidence that tells him he definitely did. That's a much braver story to tell. The liberation of a hopeless innocent is a sexier narrative, but Rose's point is a deeper one. Who has the right to decide that their sense of justice is more correctly aligned than anyone else's? Why, in examining evidence that will decide a man's fate, is anyone entitled to anything so fundamentally biased as an opinion? When all around are wearing their certainty like a rosette, often the bravest, smartest person is the one who says, "I don't know." **OLLY RICHARDS**

**Above:** Eleven men of varying degrees of ill temper.

# Sweet Smell Of Success

## The 1957 noir that's never been more topical

**1957** / CERT **PG** / DIRECTOR **ALEXANDER MACKENDRICK** / SCREENWRITERS **CLIFFORD ODETS, ERNEST LEHMAN** / CAST **BURT LANCASTER, TONY CURTIS, SUSAN HARRISON**

ONE OF THE most quotable, and widely quoted, movies of all time, *Sweet Smell Of Success* began life in 1950 as a novelette written for *Cosmopolitan* magazine by Ernest Lehman. The celebrated screenwriter was then an aspiring author making a hustler's buck scratching out fluff copy for noted press agent Irving Hoffman. To anyone acquainted with Manhattan's café society, the story's twisted relationship between obsequious press agent Sidney Falco and JJ Hunsecker, the omnipotent columnist who runs or spikes his puff-pieces, was clearly a *roman à clef* about Hoffman's close association with the reigning godfather of US gossip, Walter Winchell. The after-midnight milieu is unmistakably Winchell's world. Even the plot — Sidney attempts to earn column inches by breaking up the liaison between JJ's kid sister and jazz guitarist Dallas — was patterned after Winchell's own dirty-tricks campaign against Bill Cahn, the musical impresario who had the temerity to date his daughter.

The minor scandal that followed is forgotten and Hoffman and Winchell are a long time dead, yet their celluloid cousins, brought to vivid life by Tony Curtis and Burt Lancaster, continue to hold a fatal attraction. Like pilot fish swimming with sharks, cynical Falco types are all too familiar wherever there's money and influence. But for modern audiences, awash in a daily tsunami of trivia masquerading as news, the Winchell/Hunsecker character is a mystery lost to history. Surely someone this powerful — Lancaster's Hunsecker is as puritanical and mercurial as an Old Testament God — could only ever have existed as a crude personification of the media at large? Could a gossip columnist really have inspired so much fear? Yep.

For a large chunk of the last century one man (or woman, in the case of Winchell's rival, Dorothy Kilgallen) could hold court over actors and senators alike for a simple, if now uncomfortable, reason. Until relatively recently, gossip, opinion, even legit entertainment coverage of any kind was limited to just a few paragraphs in even the most tabloid-inclined dailies. With no celeb weeklies, no blogs and no Twitter, a one-line blind item in Winchell's column was the equivalent of a front-page splash in every single paper on today's newsstand. In certain matters, for a certain audience, Winchell's words really were the news of the world.

In retrospect, it is perfectly possible to watch this 59-year-old movie afresh and see Burt Lancaster's titanic JJ

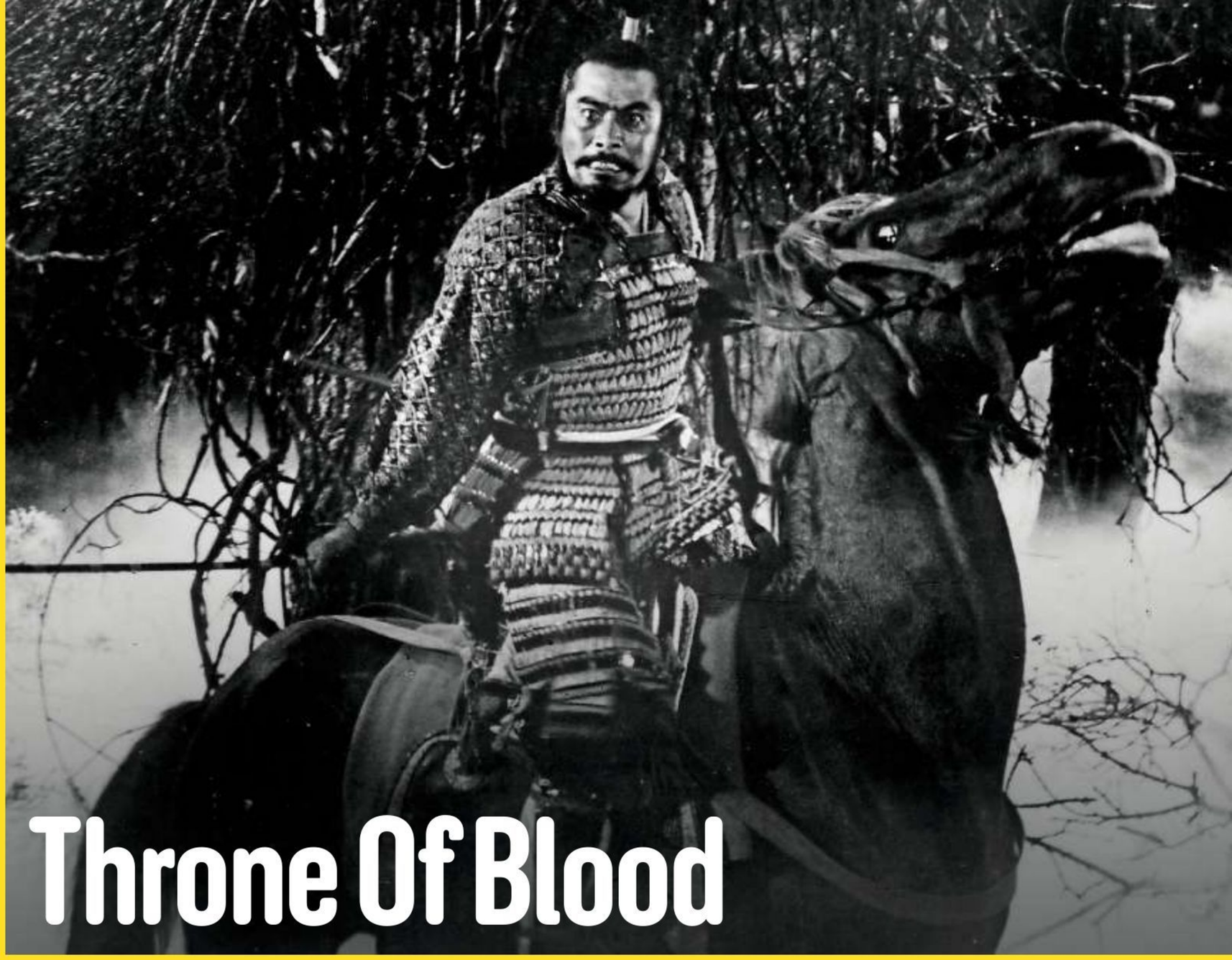


Kill your idols: Sidney Falco (Tony Curtis) lines up JJ Hunsecker (Burt Lancaster).

Hunsecker as Murdoch's murky empire incarnate. Then and now, this is how the world spins, a yo-yo dangling from the fat finger of petty tyrants. Of course, none of this is news. As Sidney would say, "I sometimes get the impression you think you live in Star-Bright Park. This is life; get used to it." Besides, to seek the moral of the tale is to miss the telling. *Sweet Smell Of Success* is a satire about scandal, with the sense to be utterly scandalous. As we drown in sanctimonious editorials about the excesses of the press, the first and best American film by Alexander Mackendrick remains the smartest, the least preachy, the most dead-on take-down of the way news is gathered precisely because it's half in love with the moral squalor it seeks to expose. Note JJ Hunsecker's exclamation, "I love this dirty town."

Lehman's screenplay was reworked by Clifford Odets and his obsessive methods led to bedlam during shooting — revised pages arrived every morning — but it's the combination of insider detail and outsider interrogation that brings clarity and drive. The once talky script was pared down to the most telling lines, while the principal relationships were layered with sexual intrigue. The on-set chaos spilled over into the frame — for all the static nightclub scenes, the picture still positively crackles with kinetic energy. Mackendrick's innovative exteriors, often shot on the run, inject pure Broadway buzz, while those famous verbal hand grenades ("He's got the scruples of a guinea pig"; "You're dead, son — get yourself buried"; "You're a cookie full of arsenic") spark even the stagiest set-piece. Of course, it may dawn that all this juice is just part of the long con. As the credits roll on a faux-happy ending for characters you don't care about, the film seems to shrug: "Well, did you want the bad guys to win?"

Released in June 1957, *Sweet* stank up the box office a long way short of success. The film's flinty heart proved too hard for the bobby-soxers who expected to swoon at their matinée idol, Curtis. Winchell was not slow to crow, but history would deny him the last laugh. For all his fame and influence, this is Winchell's legacy. **COLIN KENNEDY**



# Throne Of Blood

## *Macbeth* with katana

**1957** / CERT **PG** / DIRECTOR **AKIRA KUROSAWA** / SCREENWRITERS **HIDEO OGUNI, SHINOBU HASHIMOTO, RYÛZÔ KIKUSHIMA, AKIRA KUROSAWA** / CAST **TOSHIRÔ MIFUNE, ISUZU YAMADA, TAKASHI SHIMURA**

**Above:** Toshirô Mifune takes the Thane Of Cawdor to the Far East in *Throne Of Blood*.

THERE'S A SCHOOL of thought that says Akira Kurosawa was able to cross over to Western audiences because he was more palatable than Japanese contemporaries like Mizoguchi, Shindô, Kobayashi and Teshigahara. Kurosawa's films were, famously, remade in the West as the likes of *A Fistful Of Dollars* (*Yojimbo*) and *The Magnificent Seven* (*Seven Samurai*), but the traffic went both ways, and perhaps Kurosawa's work translated so well because the source material was often familiar. He adapted Fyodor Dostoevsky (*The Idiot*), Maxim Gorky (*The Lower Depths*), and even Ed McBain (*High And Low*). And on three occasions his touchstone was William Shakespeare: for Ran (*King Lear*), The Bad Sleep Well (*Hamlet*), and the first of them, *Throne Of Blood*, a virtuoso transposition of *Macbeth*.

Recent criticism has tended to play down *Throne Of Blood*'s essential *Macbeth*-ness, insisting there's much more going on than name- and location-changing. There's some truth to this, but also some wilful blindness. *Throne Of Blood* is absolutely, front and centre, *Macbeth*. From the Cobweb Forest (Burnham Wood) to Cobweb Castle (Dunsinane), to meetings with witches, murders of kings and trusted sidekicks, horrifying hauntings and obsessive washing of hands, *Throne Of Blood* is, beat for beat, thrillingly Shakespearean: both rip-roaring and tragic in its depiction of a nobleman's inexorable corruption and decline. In his seventh of 16 collaborations with Kurosawa, Toshirô Mifune is on typically raging form as our Macbeth cipher General Washizu, with support from Isuzu Yamada as Asaji (Lady Macbeth) and Minoru Chiaki as General Miki (Banquo).

An eerie beginning, in which mists on a blasted heath transform ruins into a standing fortress, takes us back in time and leaves us under no illusion that we're in the realm of the jidai-geki: the historical genre that Kurosawa had been forced to abandon in favour of modern-day drama (*gendai-geki*) in the US-occupied post-War Japan, where representations of the country's feudal heritage were forbidden. Times had changed by 1957, however. Kurosawa had already made his international break-out *Rashomon* and his beyond-classic *Seven Samurai*, and even received American assistance during *Throne Of Blood*'s production: bizarrely, the elaborate Cobweb Castle exterior was built with the aid of the United States Marine Corps.

That gives some clue as to the scale of the project. Kurosawa wrote the film but hadn't initially planned to direct it, until he was persuaded by studio Toho, which wanted its biggest name at the helm of a costly production. Once installed, Kurosawa wouldn't wear a model castle on a hill: he wanted the thing fully built, and while the interior scenes are sometimes stagy, the exteriors are epic, with battle scenes employing hundreds of extras.

But there is more to Kurosawa's *Macbeth* than *Macbeth*. *Throne Of Blood*'s genius is in its mapping of ›

Shakespeare's plot and themes so exactly onto a Japanese culture and milieu. More specifically, Kurosawa's great achievement here is the seemingly effortless shift from the English Renaissance stage to the *Noh* theatre. Roughly setting the film during the century of Japanese civil war that began in the 1460s, Kurosawa evokes the idiosyncratic aesthetic performance style that evolved during that time. A theatre of mime, expressive dance, sparse music and masks, it couldn't be much further from Stratford-upon-Avon, yet *Macbeth*'s characters already fit the *Noh* archetypes of the ghost, the warrior, the woman etc.

Outside may be swift camera moves, horse-mounted action and heavy weather (a very Shakespearean objective correlative for the stormy emotions of the characters), but inside it's a completely different story. The scene of Tsuzuki/Duncan's (Takamaru Sasaki) murder, for example, is played out in front of a largely still camera, the killing happening offscreen while Asaji throws tense shapes awaiting Washizu's return. Washizu's execution of Miki's killer is a similarly static affair, although the emotional blankness that some find in the film, under its *Noh* influence, is hardly in evidence: Washizu's horror at the assassin's death is abundantly clear. He may be "building a mountain of corpses to the sky", but he isn't at peace with it any more than Macbeth was.

The music, too, is *Noh*-influenced (although a pedant might point out that the nails-on-blackboard flute is a *shakuhachi* when it should be a *shinobue*), and if the style doesn't extend to actually masking the actors, the heavy make-up on the leads makes the point. Yamada in particular, while obviously not the ghost character, could easily be mistaken for one of the chalk-faced onryo ghouls that haunt Japanese literature and film to this day.

Shakespeare or *Noh*, however, *Throne Of Blood* is indisputably a classic, a perfect synthesis of cultures rather than a clash. The witch may tell Washizu that "the stage is set" for him, but it's in the context of a cinematic powerhouse that still punches above its weight. It might not be your English teacher's *Macbeth*, but it's still the best film version ever made. **OWEN WILLIAMS**

# Vertigo

## Hitchcock's beautiful nightmare

**1958** / CERT **PG** / DIRECTOR **ALFRED HITCHCOCK** / SCREENWRITERS **ALEC COPPEL, SAMUEL A. TAYLOR** / CAST **JAMES STEWART, KIM NOVAK, BARBARA BEL GEDDESPAUL STEWART**



THE MESMERISING TITLE sequence for *Vertigo* is a collage of human eyes juxtaposed with Lissajous spirals, spidery whorls devised by a French mathematician to express numerical equations. lt was Saul Bass' first for a Hitchcock film, and as it fades out we are thrown into a scene that bears the Master's signature as empathetically as the opening credits bear Bass': Jimmy Stewart, as police detective Scottie Ferguson, and his partner in hot pursuit of a fugitive across the rooftops of San Francisco. In classic Hitchcock fashion, the chase culminates in Scottie losing his footing on a steeply sloping roof and dangling by his fingertips from a flimsy gutter. Attempting to save him, his partner falls, leaving Scottie staring at his body on the pavement below. How Scottie escapes from his predicament is never explained, but the image of him clinging desperately to the building stands as a metaphor for his perilous mental state throughout the events that follow: in keeping with a terror of heights, Scottie is a man suspended over an emotional and psychological abyss, into which he is doomed to plunge by a macabre obsession with a woman who doesn't exist.

The crowning artistic achievement of Alfred Hitchcock's career as a director, *Vertigo* is a strange and haunting film of breathtaking beauty, one that lingers in the memory like a disturbing dream. It was based on a novel by French writers Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac called *Sueurs Froides (D'entre Les Morts)*. Hitchcock and the two writers who worked on the script (Alec Coppel and Sam Taylor) transferred events from post-war Marseilles to contemporary California, but kept the basic plot intact.

The many intricacies of the plot prevent a detailed summary, but in essence it is the story of a detective who falls in love with an enigmatic woman he is tailing. The woman, Madeleine, seems to be drawn towards suicide by a curse. When she leaps to her death from the tower of a Mission, the distraught detective develops a dark fascination, and in seeing Madeleine's likeness in another woman, Judy, he attempts to recreate his lost love by moulding her into the image of Madeleine. Amid the plot twists, it transpires that Judy and 'Madeleine' are, in fact, the same woman (both played with icy precision by Kim Novak), the former impersonating the latter in an elaborate scheme to cover up the murder of the real Madeleine. In the book the revelation that Judy is — or was — the phantasm he is seeking drives the detective mad, and he strangles her in a frenzy; in the film Scottie, battling his fear of heights, watches her fall to her death from the tower of the same Mission where he witnessed 'Madeleine''s fake suicide. It's a stunning bookend to the opening prologue, poetic justice for Judy's complicity in the real Madeleine's murder and, for Scottie, having seen his chimerical lover die twice, a sanity-shattering cataclysm.

Part murder mystery, part twisted love story, *Vertigo* was an intense experience for all involved. Plagued by endless delays, partly due to Hitchcock's ill health, it was not a happy shoot. In the course of the movie's prolonged gestation, Vera Miles, Hitchcock's original choice for Madeleine/Judy, became pregnant and was replaced by Novak. Hitchcock took an instant dislike to her, partly because she high-handedly



James Stewart and Kim Novak share a troubling kiss.

informed costume designer Edith Head that she would wear any colour except grey (Hitchcock insisted that Madeleine be dressed in a tightly constricting grey suit), but mostly because she was not his Madeleine, and he could never forgive her for it. He bullied her on set, ordering her to walk in a specific way and, exercising his notorious streak of sadism, stitching her into deliberately uncomfortable, tight-waisted costumes. There is an eerie symmetry between Hitchcock's treatment of Novak and Scottie's moulding of Judy. Nevertheless, the physical and emotional pressures of the shoot contributed to the uncanny tone of the film and to the superb performances of the lead actors. Stewart in particular, a Hitchcock stalwart, reveals hitherto untapped reserves of vulnerability, anguish and rage. Novak too excels herself in a dual-dual role.

The entire film is steeped in portentous melancholy. Certain scenes have an overtly spectral quality that preys on the imagination. When we first see 'Madeleine' in the cemetery, she is bathed in a ghostly green light. Later, when, at Scottie's behest, Judy finally emerges as Madeleine, she is illuminated by the green neon lights of a theatre marquee. The scene ends with the famous "revolving kiss". In extreme close-up, Scottie grabs Judy and kisses her violently, the camera appearing to whirl around them as Scottie is transported by memories of Madeleine (in fact, it was the scenery that was spinning). Here, as at other key moments, the recurrent theme of Bernard Herrmann's poignant score swells to a crescendo. Herrmann's music is absolutely integral to the minor-key mood of the entire movie.

As was his wont, Hitchcock chose to shoot the most demanding scenes last; the rooftop prologue was thus filmed almost on the last day. The cameras rolled for the final time, however, on this:

"Se. 21. Ext. Shipyard. Mr Hitchcock walks camera left to right & out passing Scottie entering. Scottie pauses to speak to Gateman who gestures and Scottie walks on & out."

An essential component to be sure, but still for some reason a droll and jaunty bit of business for a film as troubled, troubling and impossible to shake off as this. **SIMON BRAUND**

## ESSENTIAL HITCHCOCK

### REBECCA (1940)
Not an obvious comparator for *Vertigo*, but this tale of marital mystery also sees the protagonist — a woman this time — become obsessed with a dead woman, her husband's first wife.

### SPELLBOUND (1945)
Closest to *Vertigo* in theme, this uses psychology and surrealism (courtesy of a dream sequence by Salvador Dalí) to bring to life a case of mistaken identity. Overly complex but still enthralling.

### REAR WINDOW (1954)
The other great Hitchcock-James Stewart collaboration (see page 46), this centres around a voyeuristic invalid who comes to suspect foul play in one of his neighbours' flats. In contrast to *Vertigo*, however, this obsession proves well-founded…

### PSYCHO (1960)
Like Novak, Janet Leigh's character has sinister motives for her action, and like *Vertigo* it's her death that drives the plot. It's arguable whether this is a true thriller, since it created a new genre, but viewed as such it's still a masterpiece.

### MARNIE (1964)
Tippi Hedren plays another ice-cool blonde, thief-with-a-past Marnie Edgar, whose compulsive lying and kleptomania hide far deeper troubles. Sean Connery's the man trying to work her out.

# Some Like It Hot

## A fragile off-screen Marilyn Monroe creates pure on-screen magic

**1959** / CERT **PG** / DIRECTOR **BILLY WILDER** / SCREENWRITERS **BILLY WILDER, IAL DIAMOND** / CAST **MARILYN MONROE, JACK LEMMON, TONY CURTIS**

IF ALL THE words of praise that have been lavished on Billy Wilder's evergreen comedy over the years were typeset in a single line, they would encircle the Earth approximately 500 times, or stretch from Uzbekistan to Uranus twice. Every one of them is, of course, true. Based very loosely on a 1951 German film called *Fanfaren de Liebe*, *Some Like It Hot*, written by Wilder and IAL Diamond, is, as any fool knows, the story of struggling musicians Joe and Jerry (Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon), who go on the lam after witnessing the St Valentine's Day Massacre. Desperately searching for an out-of-town gig, all that turns up is a job with an all-girl jazz band bound for an engagement in Florida. With the Mob on their tail, Joe and Jerry have little choice but to dress in drag, rename themselves Josephine and Daphne, and board the train to Miami Beach.

En route — in a sleeping car scene that has lost none of its playful eroticism — both compete for the affections of the band's delectable ukulele player and star vocalist 'Sugar' Kane (Marilyn Monroe), while attempting to maintain their disguises. Things get more complicated still when, at the resort, 'Daphne' is romantically pursued by randy old millionaire Osgood Fielding III (Joe E Brown) and Joe adopts another disguise — heir to the Shell Oil fortune in order to woo Sugar. it's an elegant farce whose sprightly pacing, intricacies and romantic intrigues might have put a supercilious smile on Oscar Wilde's face. It is a film so fleet of foot, so perfectly measured in its mix of comedy, romance and suspense, that it remains a joy even as other movies of its vintage are beginning to show their wrinkles.

Wilder and Diamond take much of the credit for that. The script and direction are sublime. But it is a feature of both the screenplay and Wilder's incomparably assured hand on the tiller that they shine the spotlight squarely on the performers. What you remember and cherish time after time with *Some Like It Hot* is its embarrassment of classic scenes and effervescent, remarkable racy dialogue — 'Daphne' swooning on the bed as she announces her engagement to Osgood in a maraca-shaking reverie (the maracas were added to create pauses after test audiences laughed so much they missed most of the dialogue); Curtis romancing Monroe on the beach with his camp Cary Grant accent ("I don't talk like that," Grant allegedly sulked when he saw the movie); and, of course, the famous fade-out with 'Daphne' and Osgood heading into the sunset aboard his speedboat cue for, perhaps, the greatest last line in cinema history. Needless to say, for a film of such soufflé-like levity, it was a complete nightmare to make. And, as is duly recorded in the annals, the reason for that was Monroe. While Lemmon and Curtis hit mark after mark despite high heels and chest padding, producing a cinematic comedy duet rivalled only by Laurel & Hardy and Lemmon and Matthau, Monroe's problems on set have passed into legend.



**"IT WAS A NIGHTMARE TO MAKE; MARILYN MONROE'S PROBLEMS HAVE PASSED INTO LEGEND."**

Having already worked with Monroe on *The Seven Year Itch*, Wilder might have had an inkling of what he was in for. Still, the story that he favoured Mitzi Gaynor over Monroe is misleading. True, he had envisioned Gaynor in the role, but only until Monroe expressed interest. "We wanted to do a comedy out of the St Valentine's Day Massacre," he told Cameron Crowe in '99. "We just wanted any girl, because it was not such a big part. Mitzi Gaynor was who we had in mind. Then word came that Marilyn wanted the part. And then we had to get Marilyn. And we got her." The ruefulness in his last sentence is obvious.

Apart from turning up late — or often not turning up at all — Monroe's problem was her inability to deliver simple lines. On one excruciating day, during the scene where she rummages in a drawer for a bottle of booze, it took, according to Wilder's estimate, 80-odd takes for her to say, "Where's the bourbon?" After countless instances of "Where's the bottle?"; "Where's the whisky?"; or "Where's the bonbon?", Wilder had the line pasted in the bottom of the drawer. When Monroe forgot which drawer she was supposed to be looking in, he had the line pasted in every drawer. To make matters worse,



Hot combo: 'Josephine' (Tony Curtis, left) and 'Daphne' (Jack Lemmon, second left) with Marilyhn Monroe's 'Sugar' Kane, on ukelele.

after she fluffed each take, Monroe would get upset, burst into tears and her make-up had to be completely re-done. "We were in mid-flight and we had a nut on the plane," remarked Wilder years later, her behaviour still rankling him.

What drove Wilder — and everyone else on the set — to distraction was the apparent randomness of Monroe's meltdowns. For the scene on the beach with Curtis, she had three pages of dialogue. The scene had to be shot quickly because of the noise from military jets taking off at ten-minute intervals nearby. Monroe nailed it on the first take. "She almost fainted," recalled Wilder, somewhat wryly. Monroe's behaviour wasn't simply capricious — she had suffered a miscarriage shortly before shooting, and her third marriage to playwright Arthur Miller was already on the rocks, both of which contributed to the depression that plagued her during production — but the sympathy of co-stars and director ebbed as the shoot went on. Despite hailing her as a great comedienne shortly after the film's release, Wilder's decidedly mixed feelings about Monroe were plain to see even towards the end of his life. "I don't know why she became so popular," he told Crowe. "I never knew." What he certainly did know, however, was that when she did deliver her lines correctly, the results were magical. Monroe's performance in *Some Like It Hot*, for all that it took to drag it out of her, is lightning in a bottle: radiant, sexy and heart-meltingly vulnerable. It is a peerless example of star quality, the elusive Ingredient X that Monroe possessed in great quantities.

"There was a love affair between her and the camera," said Wilder simply. "She was much better on the screen than off." He was in a position to know. But even in his most curmudgeonly moment, he must have concluded, as does this shining testament to Monroe's allure, that nobody's perfect. **SIMON BRAUND**

## ESSENTIAL WILDER

### THE LOST WEEKEND (1945)
Wilder's film about drunkard writer Ray Milland's weekend of drinking and the DTs plays like a horror movie, and still ranks as one of the great movies about addiction.

### SUNSET BOULEVARD (1950)
The most entertaining and enduring film about the movies ever made, *Sunset Boulevard* stars Gloria Swanson as a delusional fading star who sucks would-be scripter WIlliam Holden into her dead world. See page 38.

### THE BIG CARNIVAL (1951)
Way ahead of its time, this film noir attacks the cynicism of the media. When a miner is trapped below ground, a journalist exploits the story without mercy for his own ends, and the whole town joins in.

### WITNESS FOR THE PROSECUTION (1957)
This Agatha Christie courtroom thriller adaptation is a little creaky by today's standards, but still packs plenty of twists, and Charles Laughton is superb.

### THE APARTMENT (1960)
Wilder's last classic sparkles brightest, bridging the gap between old-school screwball and modern sex farce.

# Rio Bravo

## A lesson in professionalism for Quentin Tarantino and you...

**1959** / CERT **PG** / DIRECTOR **HOWARD HAWKS** / SCREENWRITERS **JULES FURTHMAN, LEIGH BRACKETT** / CAST **JOHN WAYNE, DEAN MARTIN, RICKY NELSON**




WE LIVE IN an age of entitlement, amorality and self-assurance. Narcissism is the norm; duty anachronistic... Which is a somewhat overblown introduction to a no-nonsense oater released to mild reviews back when Eisenhower was in the White House, Pat Boone in the charts and Madonna in nappies. And despite it appearing to be effortless and easygoing entertainment, Howard Hawks' third Western — after *Red River* and *The Big Sky* — is a message movie. For a director who kept no journal, wrote few letters and undertook only a handful of interviews, this is as close as it comes to a proclamation both personal and political. lt is his celluloid statement on a way of working and a way of life: the creed of the professional.

Clichés are usually clichés because they are true, but it's a cheap lie when critics lament, "They don't make 'em like they used to." Look hard and cinematic seekers can find films now as entertaining, cynical, heartrending, sentimental, daring and romantic as any ever made. With its craft and cash, Hollywood has no limits. But babyboomer blockbusters — *Titanic*, *American Beauty* — do tend to champion impulse over obligation, desire over duty. lt is hard to imagine a modern filmmaker creating a box-office hit with this credo: quit complaining, do your job, the world doesn't owe you a thing. Hawks' picture is about standing up for yourself, embracing responsibility and acting with integrity.

It's well-documented that he and John Wayne intended the picture as a riposte to Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon*, in which Gary Cooper's put-upon sheriff, Will Kane, begs for help from lily-livered townsfolk before the return of a notorious gunfighter. "I didn't think a good sheriff was going to go running around town like a chicken with his head off asking for help and finally his Quaker wife had to save him," said Hawks. In contrast, then, Sheriff John T Chance (Wayne) stands up to tougher opposition than the four men Kane had to face down: Nathan Burdette (John Russell) is a ruthless rancher; with "30 or 40 men, all professionals", determined to stop his imprisoned brother Joe (Ciaude Akins) from being tried for murder. He bottles up the town and Chance must sit out the long, six-day wait until the arrival of the US marshal with only two broken-down deputies for assistance. "A game-legged old man and a drunk. That's all you got?" asks Ward Bond's visiting wagonmaster. "That's what I got," replies Chance. Self-pity has no place here; it's all about self-reliance. This isn't to say the characters lack compassion. Wayne — on-screen and off — has a reputation as a macho man's man: a hard-drinking bully who sees the world in black and white. But he and many of his characters are more complex than that. Yes, Chance is gruff, he deals in tough love — but it is love. He shows nothing but patience and loyalty towards Dude (Dean Martin), the heartbroken alcoholic deputy known locally as Borachan ("drunk"), while his ribbing of Stumpy (Waiter Brennan) hides only a deep affection for a wounded old man, forced off his ranch by Burdette. In one of several comic interludes, he even kisses him.



Pat Wheeler (Ward Bond) and Sheriff John T Chance (John Wayne) put duty first.

It's in these interludes that you can see the influence on Tarantino, who cites this as one of his favourite movies. Character is revealed through conversation, plot-drivers hidden in chit-chat. And yet sometimes a scene exists simply, it seems, for us to hang out with the cast. The singalong sequence is as apparently pointless and just as unforgettable as the *Like A Virgin* exchange in *Reservoir Dogs*. lt was actually included as a nod to the commercial appeal of Rat Pack lounge-singer Martin and Ricky Nelson, who snared the part of Colorado — the young gunslinger who eventually allies with Chance — after Montgomery Clift turned down the opportunity to reunite with his *Red River* director and co-star. The teenage rockabilly idol was a household name; casting him was Hawks' way of broadening his picture's appeal. He needed a hit: it had been four years since he last sat in the canvas chair for misguided epic *Land Of The Pharaohs* (Hawks got his wish: *Rio Bravo* was the third highest-grossing picture of 1959). If Colorado required little more than boyish good looks and a winning smile, Dude — in contrast — demanded that Martin ditch his Las Vegas ladykiller mannerisms and dig deep, sweating and shaking and desperate as a man who has been ruined by love — or lust.

But if *Rio Bravo* is a boys' film, it is not purely a boys' club. If Dude's heart was destroyed by a woman, Chance's is melted by one. Knowing yet innocent, sarcastic yet sincere, Angie Dickinson is a wonder as visiting gambling girl Feathers: dizzyingly beautiful, but as bull-headed as the man with the badge. It is one of cinema's greatest pleasures to see her bemuse and befuddle Wayne. The lawman can deal with bullets and brawn, but not her erotic insouciance in the card-game shakedown. Strong-minded, provocative, principled — she's a descendent of Lauren Bacall's independent women in earlier Hawks efforts with his *Rio Bravo* writers Leigh Brackett (*The Big Sleep*) and Jules Furthman (*To Have And Have Not*). In the face of her determined personality, Chance doesn't stand one; he has to submit. Wayne is wonderful, too, in these scenes, charmingly embarrassed and confused, cleansing his palate after playing a man fuelled by hate in his previous, most recent cowboy outing, *The Searchers*.

The romantic sojourns, the singalong, the jail-house scenes of male camaraderie were seen as indulgences by some critics, but they make the movie — you need to know the characters to love them — and any hint of laziness is obliterated in the action, filmed with economy and drive. The opening sequence is masterful: four minutes without dialogue, just pure storytelling as the murder that triggers the story is staged.

Hawks believed he could have made a better picture, and went on to effectively remake it twice, with *El Dorado* and *Rio Lobo*. But he never bettered the old-fashioned Western he created on the brink of the birth of the permissive society.

Now the idea of obligation and duty might seem as relevant to 21st-century audiences as horse-drawn carriages or carrier pigeons. But by looking to himself, Chance draws the town around him; it's an admirable siege mentality. The film is subtle, good-natured, funny and charming — a movie to measure yourself and others by. As Tarantino observes, "When I'm getting serious about a girl, I show her *Rio Bravo*... and she better fucking like it." **NEV PIERCE**

# The Apartment

## Film-wise and comedy-wise, it's close to perfection

**1960** / CERT **PG** / DIRECTOR **BILLY WILDER** / SCREENWRITER **BILLY WILDER, IAL DIAMOND** / CAST **JACK LEMMON, SHIRLEY MACLAINE, FRED MACMURRAY**

AS BILLY WILDER stood on stage collecting the second of his three Oscars — Best Screenplay, Best Director and Best Picture — for *The Apartment*, writer Moss Hart leaned over and whispered, "Billy, it's time to stop." The remark would haunt Wilder. Nothing he did afterwards would quite live up to this "dirty fairy tale", as one contemporary critic dubbed it, in the director's own hyper-critical estimation. Perhaps in later films Wilder felt paralysed by the total success — finance-wise, awards-wise and artistry-wise — of this one. "The picture that had the fewest faults, obvious faults, is maybe *The Apartment*," he grudgingly conceded of his life's work. Achieving near-perfection is a terrible curse for someone who had been driven to make the next picture better than his last.

Tottering after the high heels of the box office-smashing *Some Like It Hot*, *The Apartment* saw Wilder once again skirting the edge of popular morality with a censor-baiting sex comedy. But where its predecessor had been insulated from contemporary mores by its period setting and farcical tone, this was a leaner, more threatening beast: an office story set in a recognisable New York, corporate sharks replacing Prohibition gangsters. If *Some Like It Hot* had winked about sex, *The Apartment* came right out and shouted it from the rooftops. Few Oscar wins could more clearly have signalled the declining influence of the Hays Code that had policed film morality for 30 years.

Our protagonist is company schnook CC 'Bud' Baxter (Jack Lemmon), who has "this little problem with my apartment". He's been pressed into loaning it to his insurance-giant superiors for their questionable romantic assignations in return for good performance reviews. Baxter finally challenges the arrangement after unscrupulous personnel manager Mr Sheldrake (Fred MacMurray) visits to use and — emotionally — abuse elevator operator Fran Kubelik (Shirley MacLaine), on whom Baxter has a crush.

If the film condemns Baxter's bosses, it's not so much for their sexual shenanigans as their corporate bullying; Wilder's sympathies, as ever, are with the 99 per cent. But no character is blameless; rarely has there been a mainstream hit offering such greyscale morality. Baxter falls into his role of brothel operator by accident, we learn, but accepts it with broad equanimity and, on at least one occasion, active glee when it appears that his promotion has finally arrived. His priorities are profoundly out of whack — his primary qualms tend to concern his lack of sleep — but he's by no means a bad person; he's just living an unexamined life and has not yet become the mensch he was born to be. Kubelik, meanwhile, carries on an affair with a married man and attempts suicide when it goes wrong, using a broken mirror because it "makes me look the way I feel". No wonder the film is so hard to categorise: although both hilarious and romantic, these heroes could hardly be further from the common, garden-variety rom-com.

Of course, that's chiefly because these are recognisably human beings, in a superbly balanced script from Wilder and regular collaborator IAL Diamond. With even a little over-emphasis on Baxter's professional dilemmas, the story would descend into a pathetic, and distinctly minor, office tragedy; hit the love story too hard, and suddenly it's weightless. Waltzing the knife edge between the two is Jack Lemmon, a man who could make rock-bottom soar, but, gifted Diamond and Wilder's biting comic tone, launches rockets. Lemmon sees his character gradually realise the consequences of what Baxter's doing without losing the audience's sympathies for what he's already done, and remains sympathetic even when acting the cad. His CC Baxter is funny, self-effacing, naive, romantic, venal, morose and not half as callous as he'd like to believe, Lemmon adding just a touch of blithe optimism to leaven the darker turns. It's a subtle effort — Baxter is and remains an ordinary guy, not some movie hero — but one that still feels modern and utterly relatable. Who hasn't wanted a shortcut to the top? Who hasn't rationalised the tawdriness it takes to get there? The scene where Baxter settles in for an evening to watch *Grand Hotel*, bachelor ready-meal on hand, only to be frustrated by endless advertisements, could have been written yesterday. The whole film, in fact, could be retrofitted as a particularly heavy

**"RARELY HAS THERE BEEN A MAINSTREAM HIT OFFERING SUCH GREYSCALE MORALITY."**



CC Baxter (Jack Lemmon) proves a kitchen whizz as Fran Kubelik (Shirley MacLaine) looks on. **Below left:** Will elevator operator Fran keep giving CC the cold shoulder?



episode of *Mad Men*, what with the adultery, attempted suicide and corruption, the snappy dialogue and keen observation. Don Draper would fit in nicely in the higher echelons of Consolidated Life; Pete Campbell would leap at Baxter's method of advancing through its ranks.

MacLaine, in an only slightly easier role, has to indulge despair without appearing dreary, to play quirky without tipping into what we now call manic-pixie-dream-girl territory (cf Zooey Deschanel) and to give us a pay-off that's never for a moment schmaltzy. Neither Wilder nor Diamond would ever say who came up with her iconic final line ("It's not an ending like, 'Nobody's perfect,' but then again, at least it was not too schmaltzy," Wilder sniffed harshly), but, combined with a killer smile, it could hardly be bettered by a mere snog.

"That was a very lucky and happy picture," conceded Wilder eventually. If anyone harbours doubts about his technical skills as a director, they should be reassured by his report that he shot the film in 50 days, edited it in a week and left no more than three feet of film on the cutting room floor. That's a master director at work, one who knows precisely what he wants, precisely how to get it and assembles precisely the team to do it. Wilder never did manage to top this film, but that should be no source of shame when his career high point is this good. That's just the way it crumbles, cookie-wise. **HELEN O'HARA**

# Spartacus

## How a troubled vanity project became a sword 'n' sandals stunner

**1960** / CERT **PG** / DIRECTOR **STANLEY KUBRICK** / SCREENWRITER **DALTON TRUMBO** / CAST **KIRK DOUGLAS, LAURENCE OLIVIER, JEAN SIMMONS**

"I'M SPARTACUS." "I'M Spartacus!" "I'm Spartacus!" A defiant chorus of captives in chains rising to their feet and declaring themselves to be Rome's Most Wanted Man is one of the best-loved scenes in cinema, from arguably the greatest sword 'n' sandals story ever told, inspired by the historic slave revolt that humiliated mighty Rome from 73 to 71 BC.

The scene has been invoked in scores of dramas, comedies and even TV commercials, from *Monty Python's Life Of Brian* ("I'm Brian, and so's my wife!") to Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*, from the *Doctor Who* episode *The Fires Of Pompeii* (in which both the Doctor and Donna claim to be Spartacus) to the Nike ad of children piping, "I'm Tiger Woods!" For the record, the ex-slave army's resounding assertion of identity in Spartacus was recorded at an American college football game (Michigan State versus Notre Dame University), where some 76,000 gridiron fans in the stands lustily obliged director Stanley Kubrick's sound unit with cries of, "I'm Spartacus!" and also, for the Roman opponents' rallying cheer, "Hail, Crassus!"

The film was an immediate hit with cinemagoers and the majority of critics. Bizarrely, then, its most notable detractor was director Kubrick, for which Kirk Douglas branded him "a talented shit". It was damned silly of Kubrick, who, despite disdaining the script as "dumb", did a fine job contrasting conniving senators of Ancient Rome with the humble heroes against a spectacular backdrop, with cracking battle sequences and a heart-rending final scene.

The film was adapted (in secret, by blacklisted screenwriter Dalton Trumbo, who Douglas later famously named in the credits to bring that shameful episode to a close) from a novel by Howard Fast. It tells how a rugged Thracian born into slavery — but forever yearning for freedom — is purchased for certain death in the arena, falls in love with slave girl Varinia (Jean Simmons) and, stung by her sale to wealthy, lascivious Roman power-player Marcus Licinius Crassus (Laurence Olivier), sparks a great escape that grows into insurrection when a multitude of runaway slaves flock to the liberator.

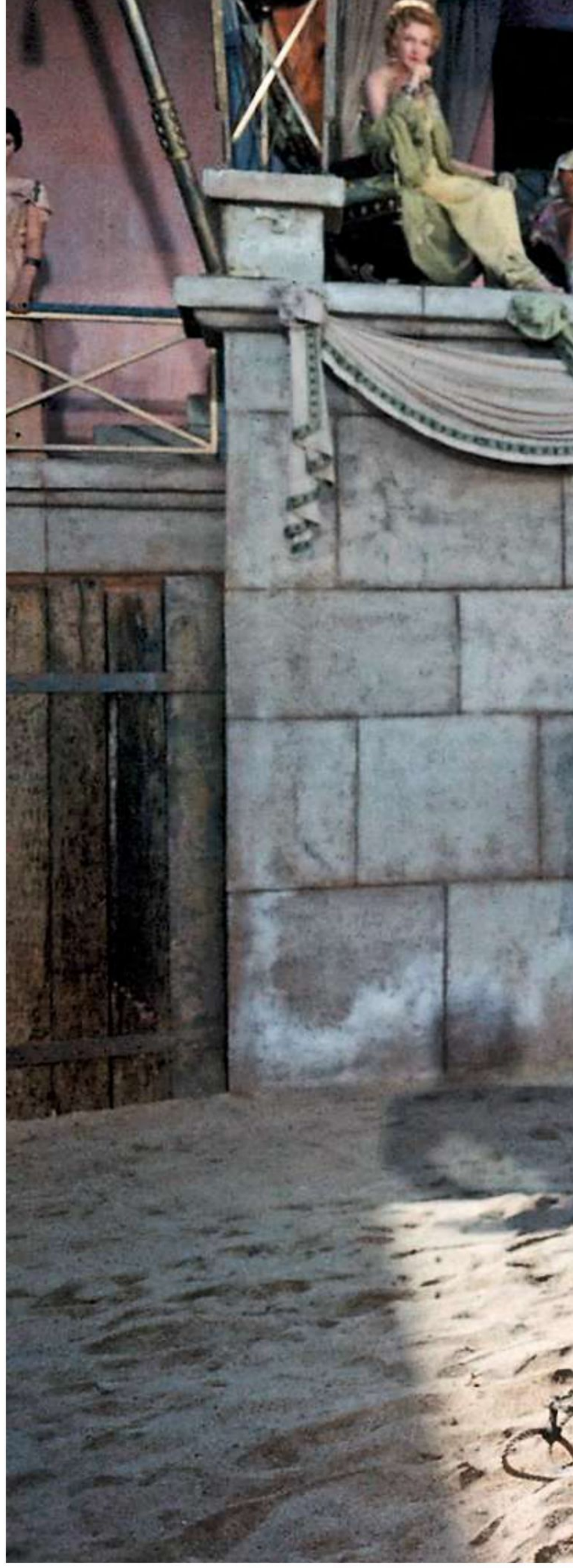
After beating the outraged Romans at their own game, Spartacus and his followers are set to sail away to new lives when they are betrayed, bottled up and heartbreakingly slaughtered, although they go down valiantly. And the crucified Spartacus lives long enough to see his newborn son free.

The film plays out in a classic three acts. The first presents the horrors and degradation of enslavement, brutal gladiator schooling, the depravity of the Roman masters. Its highlight is Woody Strode's magnificent moment as gladiator Draba, when he refuses to kill Spartacus in the arena for the amusement of partying Roman toffs and hurls his trident whizzing past the handsome head of decadent host Crassus, who kills him. Cue the retribution of the furious gladiators and their great escape. The second section lyrically dwells on the joy of freedom, love, solidarity against hardship, and the flight plan.

In the last third, Roman in-fighting and the growing legend of Spartacus build to the thrilling climactic battle of men, women and children against the odds, endgame, united defiance against the victors ("I'm Spartacus!"), mass crucifixion and the sacrificial death of the hero. "Death is the only freedom a slave knows. That's why he's not afraid of it. That's why we'll win." It's an inspirational story of optimism and the impulses for liberty and dignity in the human spirit. But really, *Spartacus* the film was a colossal vanity project born out of professional pique and made amid antagonistic and vying visions.

It came about because its producer and star, Kirk Douglas, was turned down for the lead in 1959's much-Oscared *Ben-Hur*. Wounded that William Wyler chose Charlton Heston over him, Douglas decided he'd show them, and make his own epic. He made a terrific fist of it. *Spartacus* "only" won four Oscars to *Ben-Hur*'s 11, but it was a hugely popular spectacle — still preferred by those with reservations about *Ben-Hur*'s excess and religiosity — and it swiftly repayed the then-astronomical $12 million Douglas put into it. Unquestionably it is Douglas' film.

**"KUBRICK WAS HIDING BEHIND THE CAMERA, AFRAID OF KIRK DOUGLAS, WHO CALLED HIM 'BOY'."**



Draba (Woody Strode) and Spartacus (Kirk Douglas) prepare to battle. Or, they're smuggling budgies.

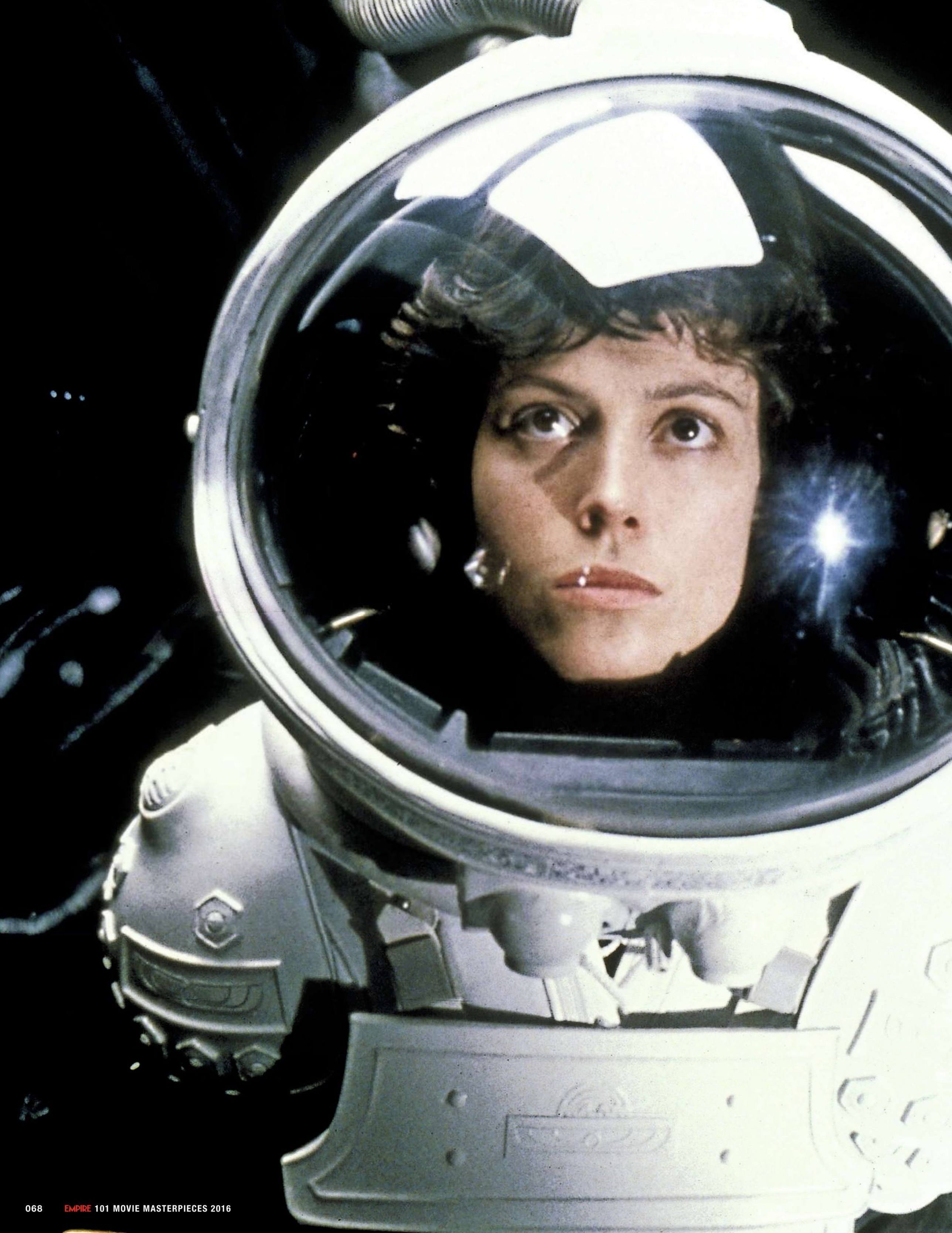
His first choice of director was Anthony Mann, but they fell out within two weeks of filming (Mann shot the opening Libyan quarry scenes, where gutsy Spartacus hamstrings a guard with his teeth, catching the eye of Peter Ustinov's wily slave-trader and gladiatorial impresario Batiatus, a performance that won him an Oscar).

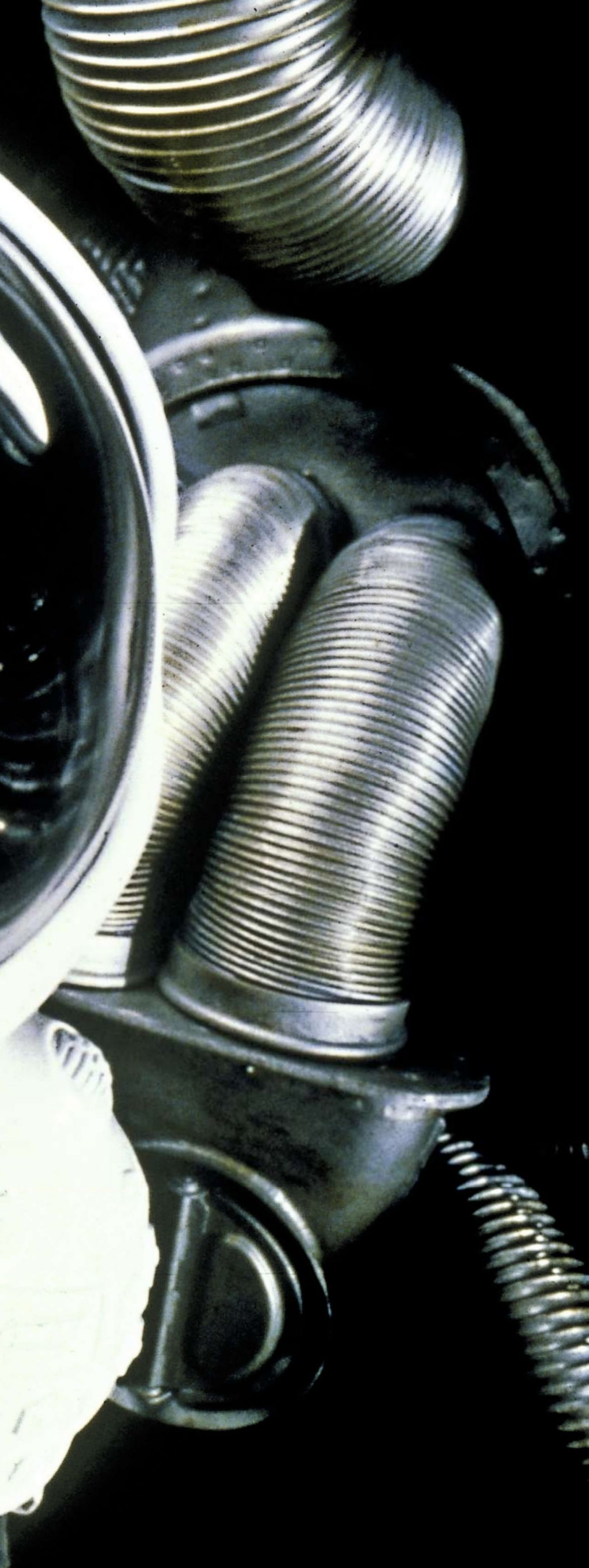
Enter Kubrick, who had impressed Douglas when they made *Paths Of Glory*. Their friendship didn't survive long into *Spartacus*.

Kubrick took issue with the flawless saintliness and heroism of Spartacus as scripted. Douglas, unsurprisingly, did not. Kubrick wanted to up the grim realism, while to leftie Trumbo the big picture was a heartening parable of liberty, equality and fraternity. On the whole Douglas agreed, and the purity brigade further undermined Kubrick's attempt at more cynical input by cutting the violence and sex: gory battle scenes, and the notorious homo-erotic seduction scene of Crassus and Tony Curtis' pretty boy, the Greek singer/body slave Antoninus, in the bath. (When the film was eventually restored back in 1991, the degraded sound for the "lost" bathing scene was re-recorded by Curtis and brilliant Olivier mimic Anthony Hopkins.)

Very belatedly the question arose: if Spartacus is so superior, how can he lose? So... a couple of new scenes were written. Enter Herbert Lom, glittering as the suave, exotic, turbanned and bejewelled agent of the pirates, paid handsomely with booty to carry the former slaves beyond Rome's reach, but abandoning them at the 11th hour. According to Lom, by the time he arrived Kubrick was like a schoolboy hiding behind the camera, "obviously afraid of Kirk Douglas", who called him "Boy" and responded incredulously to a bit of direction with phrases like, "What was that?"

All of which goes to show that, unlike those allegedly happy film shoots where the results are a mess, a production on which strong points of view, creative debates and heated passions were constantly in play resulted in an enduring winner, because the people making it cared so deeply, and the man in charge clung stubbornly to his personal, heroic vision. **ANGIE ERRIGO**





# THE NEW WORLD

## 1961-1980

**Movie brats, broken rebels and the rise of the auteur: when cinema cut its apron-strings and grew up, on screen and off**

# To Kill A Mockingbird

## Gregory Peck is given a hero's welcome

**1962** / CERT **PG** / DIRECTOR **ROBERT MULLIGAN** / SCREENWRITER **HORTON FOOTE** / CAST **GREGORY PECK, ROBERT DUVALL, BROCK PETERS, MARY BADHAM**

IN 2003, THE American Film Institute announced its list of the top 100 cinematic heroes and villains and, to the surprise of many, the heroic winner wasn't a muscle-bound, gun-toting meathead. Leaving James Bond shaking his vodka martini and Indiana Jones whipless was a kind-hearted attorney and loving father, Mr Atticus Finch, the lead character in Robert Mulligan's 1962 adaptation of Harper Lee's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *To Kill A Mockingbird*. The role of Finch was taken by Gregory Peck and his performance alone elevates a gothic melodrama into the realm of a masterpiece.

At this stage in his career, Peck was coming off a dream run. His portrayal of Captain Ahab in John Huston's *Moby Dick* (1956) won him an Oscar. The thoughtful thespian had made *On The Beach* (1959), *The Guns Of Navarone* (1961) and *How The West Was Won* (1962), and now Universal wanted to take advantage of the actor's innate integrity to bring humanity and warmth to the role of the lawyer, much to the delight of the author.

Lee, best friend and neighbour to *Breakfast At Tiffany*'s scribe Truman Capote, wrote only two books in her life (*Mockingbird* and semi-sequel *Go Set A Watchman*, rediscovered by Lee and published in 2015, a year before her death), and her 1960 semi-autobiographical tome is as cherished now as it was when first released. In the 55 years after her debut, Lee went on to help Capote research *In Cold Blood*, but as far as putting finger to typewriter again, it was not to be. Why? She had two reasons, according to Lee's confidant Rev Dr Thomas Lane Butts, who explained to *The Guardian* that she had told him, "One, I wouldn't go through the pressure and publicity I went through with *To Kill A Mockingbird* for any amount of money. Second, I have said what I wanted to say and I will not say it again."

But what a legacy. Part courtroom drama, part innocent childhood memoir,



**"THE CASTING AT EVERY LEVEL IS SUBLIME. THE THREE CHILDREN ARE AMAZING IN THEIR UNINHIBITED PERFORMANCES."**

part searing indictment of a racist society that should have known better, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, scripted by TV scribe Horton Foote, depicted a horrendous hypocrisy in US history.

Set in the sweaty clime of America's Deep South against a hotbed of racial tension in the 1930s, *To Kill A Mockingbird* is told through the eyes of Jean Louise Finch, nicknamed Scout (Mary Badham, sister of *Saturday Night Fever* director John), a young tomboy who still views the world with wide-eyed wonder. Her older brother, Jem, however, is becoming ever more cynical with age. One summer they meet Dill (John Megna) and the three head out for a summer of misadventure, often involving spying on the mysterious, ramshackle, "haunted" house of Boo Radley (a name appropriated by an alt-pop British band in the '90s).

**Left:** Atticus Finch (Gregory Peck) and Tom Robinson (Brock Peters) take a stand. **Above:** Scout (Mary Badham) shows a chum who's boss.

Jem and Scout's father, Atticus (also a '90s indie band, this one from Sydney), is the public defender and an upstanding member of society. The kids' idyllic summer takes a turn when Finch is called to represent Tom Robinson (Brock Peters), a black man charged with the rape of a local white girl. It is a case he knows he cannot win.

To his children, Finch is a straight-laced stick-in-the-mud. They cannot understand why he turns the other cheek against a tirade of racial taunting. That is until a pivotal scene when the gentle father takes arms against a rabid dog that is terrorising the neighbourhood.

As the summer gets hotter and the court case longer, Jem and Scout realise their father is more than they thought he was. It is a sign of the power of Peck's performance that whether lining up a shot or sitting back, relaxing in a rocking chair, he dominates the screen. And don't even get us started on his closing argument. The film gave Peck the role of his career. He was born to be Atticus Finch. Lee was in no doubt as to the reason why: "When he played Atticus Finch, he had played himself."

The courtroom is a cauldron of lies, deceit and overboiling emotion. In the centre of the seething hatred, Finch remains calm, even when his client has the temerity to say, "I felt sorry for her."

It's not all the Gregory Peck Show. The casting at every level is sublime. The three children, in particular, are amazing in their uninhibited performances. Strangely, much like the book's author, the trio of pint-sized thesps didn't further their careers. Only Megna has a résumé longer than a handful of features.

Mary Badham is beautifully naive as Scout. Often heartbreaking, she delivers many of the film's most perfectly judged lines of dialogue. With a simple, "Hey, Mr Cunningham," outside the town jail, Scout unknowingly diffuses a potential race riot as she stands between her father and the rednecks. At the time, she became the youngest actress ever to be nominated for a Best Supporting Actress Oscar, but lost out to Patty Duke, who won for Arthur Penn's *The Miracle Worker*. The film, nominated for eight Oscars, did take the awards for Art Direction, Best Adapted Screenplay and Best Actor. Of the other young performers, only a blond Robert Duvall, playing Boo Radley, was to continue with an acting career of any note. You may have heard of him (he loves the smell of napalm in the morning).

Beautifully shot by cinematographer Russell Harlan (*Rio Bravo*) in luminous monochrome hues that accentuate the forbidding finale but glisten in the Alabama sunlight, *Mockingbird* is a visual feast. The score, another sonic masterclass from maestro Elmer Bernstein (*The Magnificent Seven* et al) is rightly hailed as a landmark. Even Mulligan, at this stage a journeyman director who had spent most of his time behind the camera for television, created a piece of work way beyond his previous endeavours. Everyone was at the top of their game. Fifty years old and still shining, *To Kill A Mockingbird* is a masterpiece. No closing argument needed. **DAVID MICHAEL BROWN**

# 8 1/2

## How Federico Fellini turned a mental block into essential cinema

**1963** / CERT **15** /
DIRECTOR
**FEDERICO FELLINI** /
SCREENWRITERS
**FEDERICO FELLINI,**
**ENNIO FLAIANO,**
**TULLIO PINELLI,**
**BRUNELLO RONDI** /
CAST **MARCELLO**
**MASTROIANNI,**
**ANOUK AIMÉE,**
**CLAUDIA**
**CARDINALE**

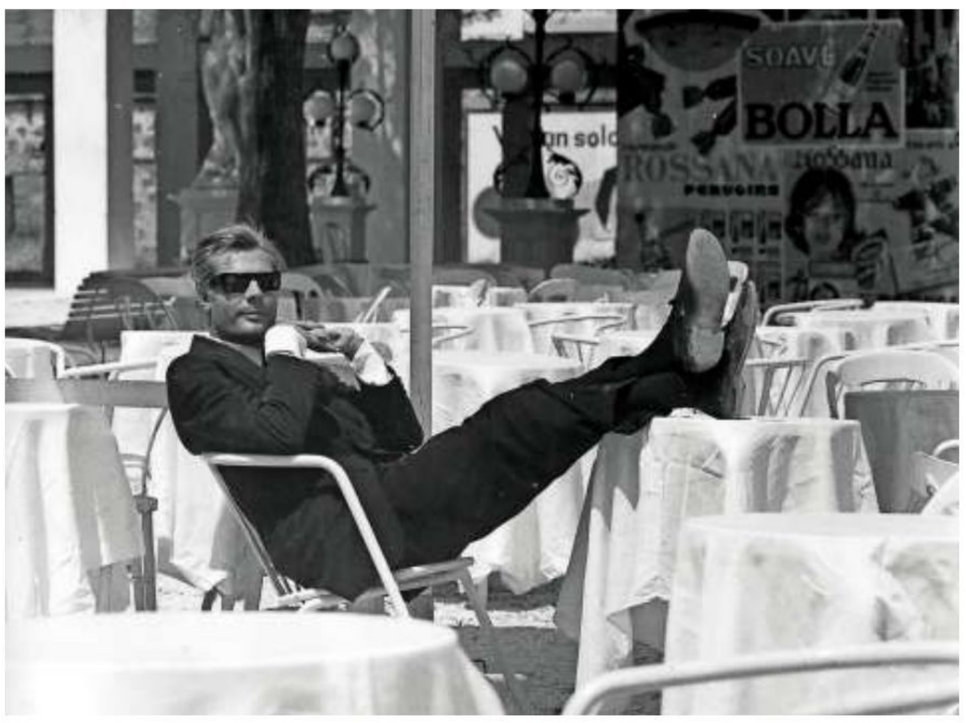
BEFORE CALLING "ACTION" on *8½*, titled, for the time being, *La Bella Confusione* (*The Beautiful Confusion*), Federico Fellini wrote himself a stern reminder and taped it to his camera where it would be in constant view. It read: "*Ricordati che è un film comico.*" ("Remember, this is a comedy.") The 43-year-old director evidently took his own advice to heart, and produced not only one of the most revered comic films of all time, but also a shining example of the adage that true art is born from strife.

By the early 1960s, Fellini's stock as a filmmaker could hardly have been higher. His films, *La Strada*, *Nights Of Cabiria* and *La Dolce Vita* among them, had earned him the drooling adoration of the intelligentsia, prestigious awards by the boatload and an avalanche of critical plaudits declaring him the most inspired and original artist of his generation. After the huge international success of 1960's *La Dolce Vita* and the visually lush segment he contributed to *Boccaccio '70*, a portmanteau retelling of *The Decameron*, the film world waited with bated breath to see what his fevered imagination would conjure next. Unfortunately, Fellini had no clue what that might be. Under the intense weight of expectation, the pressure of public scrutiny and the distractions of a complex personal life, his muse had done a runner. Fellini's greatest fear, artistic bankruptcy, had been realised.

His solution to this — as it has been for countless artists before and since — was to turn his gaze inward, to ponder the creative process itself and the dilemma of his present situation: the pressure to produce work of significance under the glare of the media spotlight, while coping with a troubled private life. Initially, however, with the combined resources of Rome's Cinecittà Studios at his disposal, sets built and crew standing by, the notion was still a little vague. "[*I had*] a confused desire to sketch out








**Above left:** Guido Anselmi (Marcello Mastroianni) with mistress Carla (Sandra Milo). **Above:** The various states of Guido as he channels Fellini.

a man in a day out of his life," Fellini later told John Gruen of *The New York Herald Tribune*. "The picture of a man in his contradictory, unclear sum of diverse realities, in which you could see all the levels of his being, the planes superimposed on each other like a palace of which the facades have crumbled and which reveals its internal structure, still intact, stairways, hallways, rooms, the furniture...

The concept solidified, he claimed in his autobiography *I, Fellini*, during an impromptu birthday party thrown for one of the Cinecittà grips by his workmates. When it came to the toast, Fellini was moved and astonished when the cups of warm spumante were raised to "The Magician", as they called him, rather than to the birthday boy. Realising their livelihoods depended on him coming up with something more than a "confused desire", he got to work in earnest.

Fellini christened the resulting film $8^{1/2}$, the figure alluding to the place at which his new film fell in his canon — he'd already directed six full-length features, two segments for other films and had collaborated with Alberta Lattuada on *Luci del varieta* in 1950. He deemed the last three projects half a film each, his output so far thus adding up to $7^{1/2}$, so this film would be $8^{1/2}$ — cute, but someone should have told him it wasn't a patch on *La Bella Confusione*. The autobiographical elements of $8^{1/2}$ are self-evident. lt stars Marcello Mastroianni, Fellini's regular alter-ego, as Guido Anselmi, a celebrated Italian filmmaker whose attempts to get to grips with his next film, a banal sci-fi movie, are hampered by director's block, growing disinterest in the material, technical and artistic complications, and his disintegrating relationship with wife Luisa (Anouk Aimee). In the wake of his last big hit, he's also being badgered by previous collaborators looking for work — something else, it's safe to assume, closely mirrored by Fellini's predicament at the time. Confused and fed up, Guido sinks into a reverie of his past, his dreams recalling the women he has loved and lost, poignant episodes from his childhood and bizarre events that symbolise his fractured emotional state. Eventually, both literally and figuratively, the dream sequences merge with reality. In what is perhaps the film's most famous scene, Guido is trapped in a traffic jam, hammering frantically on his car window and yelling soundlessly at the unheeding motorists around him.

In effect, $8^{1/2}$ is an extended metaphor for its own creation — a metafilm. Initially, Fellini had not intended it to be so overtly autobiographical. In early script drafts, Guido was a writer struggling to finish a novel. However, since Mastroianni had played a writer in his last film, Antonioni's *La Notte*, Fellini decided to make him a film director instead. "How am I going to ask Marcello to play a writer again?" he asked: "He'll end up believing he's one and he'll write a novel." Naturally, there are many more levels to $8^{1/2}$ than Fellini simply exorcising his creative demons. Without delving too deeply into its more psychological aspects, it is pertinent to Fellini's stature as an artist to mention that the film teems with Jungian imagery, while grappling with the alienating effects of modernity (a theme common to many Italian films of the period) and, overall, the exasperating quest for contentment in an arbitrary and uncertain world.

These broader themes have not, however, immunised $8^{1/2}$ from charges of self-indulgence — charges which have some justification. Yes, it is certainly self-indulgent to put the resources of a major film studio, the time and talent of a large cast and crew, and a not inconsiderable amount of other people's money into a surreal, non-linear story ostensibly about you, your problems with the missus and what goes on in your head when the lights go out. But no more so than, say, Bob Dylan channelling a painful marital break-up into *Blood On The Tracks*. lt is, after all, what artists do — hold up that big funhouse mirror to reality in the hope of saying something profound about life. "Life is the combination of magic and pasta," wrote Fellini in *I, Fellini*, saying something characteristically profound, comical and strange, very much like his films. "Films are the magic and pasta is the reality, or is it the other way around? I have never been very good at distinguishing between what is real and what is not."

In a pungent footnote to one of the most famous instances of art imitating life, four years after completing $8^{1/2}$, art conspired to imitate life imitating art imitating life when Fellini informed producer Dino De Laurentiis, who had invested in a number of huge and hugely expensive sets (including a scale model of Cologne cathedral) for his next project, *Il Viaggio Di G. Mastorna*, that he would not be able to finish the film. **SIMON BRAUND**

## "FELLINI'S SOLUTION TO ARTISTIC BANKRUPTCY WAS TO PONDER THE CREATIVE PROCESS ITSELF."

# The Birds

## How 22 pages became a masterclass in sustained terror

**1963** / CERT **15** / DIRECTOR **ALFRED HITCHCOCK** / SCREENWRITER **EVAN HUNTER** / CAST **TIPPI HEDREN, ROD TAYLOR, SUZANNE PLESHETTE**

### READING DAPHNE DU

Maurier's short story, *The Birds*, 63 years after its original publication in 1952, it's not difficult to see why Alfred Hitchcock had long thought it impossible to turn into a full-length movie. Set under the "salt-grey sky" of Du Maurier's beloved Cornish coast, at barely 22 pages long it's a slight little nightmare: a farm-worker, naturally sensitive to the rhythms of the natural world, notices that the local bird-life is behaving oddly. That night a flock of birds inexplicably smashes through the windows of the family's small cottage, terrorising the children, and subsequent trips into the village reveal that the avian attack has been widespread and, for many, fatal. The second half of the story concerns itself with the father fortifying the house, and Du Maurier leaves the family as the light fades, and they await the night's oncoming terrors.

Bleak and enigmatic, certainly, and its theme of sudden, devastating attack is seasoned with more than a little Cold War nuclear anxiety. But it is devoid of character development or much incident, apart from the terrifying avian attacks; the meat for a movie just isn't there.

But then, Hitch must have pondered, there are passages as irresistible to him as this: "Covering his head with his arms he ran towards the cottage. They kept coming at him from the air, silent save for the beating wings. The terrible, fluttering wings. He could feel the blood on his hands, his wrists, his neck. Each stab of a swooping beak tore his flesh. If only he could keep them from his eyes. Nothing else mattered. He must keep them from his eyes..."

And then fate intervened in the shape of a newspaper headline: "SEABIRD INVASION HITS COASTAL HOMES" shrieked the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* on Friday 18 August 1961. In the early hours of the morning, it reported, "millions" of birds had invaded the area, causing panic and much damage. Underneath the headline was a picture of a sheriff's deputy leaning out of the window of his squad car smiling at a dead seagull draped across its smashed windscreen. "He got the bird — or was it vice versa?" smirks the caption. Possibly it was the deliciously sinister implication of that vice versa that finally galvanised Hitch into action.

He had, of course, recently released a movie which delivered more than its fair share of sudden, flesh-renting violence in *Psycho*, and audiences had lapped up this new, ferociously efficient version of the Hitchcock experience. Ever sensitive to the needs of the market, Hitch realised they would expect a similarly gruelling follow-up. But instead of simply repeating the stripped-down, terrifying minimalism of *Psycho*, he conceived its succeeding film as having some of the surreal, hallucinatory quality of *Vertigo*. *The Birds* would be a horror movie of a kind, but it would also be an enigma, and as with *Vertigo* the riddle at the centre of the film would be a woman.

Screenwriter Evan Hunter didn't so much adapt Du Maurier's story as simply lift the central notion of nature run amok, relocate it to California and switch the protagonist's gender. The rough-hewn man of the soil was replaced with coiffured ingénue Tippi Hedren — or, rather, 'Tippi' Hedren. As a typical act of proprietorship, Hitchcock insisted that she place inverted commas around her given name, as if to make it — and her — not quite real, a useful strategy perhaps given the tortures he was about to put his new discovery through.

Much has been written about the abuse heaped upon Hedren. Before the advent of CGI or much in the way of travelling mattes, tying live birds to his star was probably the only way to get the necessary shots; or, at least, Hitch could

**"TIPPI HEDREN'S TORTURED SHOOT RESULTED IN ONE OF HITCHCOCK'S MOST DIVISIVE FILMS."**



Tippi Hedren deflects some winged attackers in *The Birds.*



provide that justification for an element of the film from which it is possible he drew some kind of relish (though many, including Hedren, contradict this).

What emerged from Hedren's tortured shoot was one of Hitchcock's oddest and most divisive films. For some, its strange atmosphere, motiveless and inexplicable events and ambiguous ending are more irritating than intriguing. For others, this is precisely the film's major strength; *The Birds* eschews explanation in favour of pure mystery and, therefore, purer terror. As Du Maurier ponders in the penultimate paragraphs of the original story: "How many millions of years of memory were stored in those little brains, behind the stabbing beaks, the piercing eyes, now giving them the instinct to destroy mankind with the deft precision of machines?" She, like Hitchcock, wisely opts to give no answer.

Now *The Birds* seems to be ahead of its time, channelling cinematic showiness then yet to fully crystallise: the seaside town inexplicably terrorised by a ferocious threat would find its echo in *Jaws* (and then *The Fog*); there is something of the disaster movie in the set-up.

It is, of course, the final shot that lingers. The birds gather silently, as the protagonists make their getaway; but to what kind of world are they escaping? Hunter's original screenplay extended the film by another ten minutes, taking the horrified car passengers through a vision of hell: dead victims would be slumped in shop-doorways, the corpse of a policeman draped over a roadblock (an echo of that original newspaper photo with the outcome reversed?); a school bus would be seen lying on its side, its interior left to the imagination. There was even talk, according to Hedren, of a final shot on the Golden Gate Bridge.

Of all Hitch's films, *The Birds* is the most open-ended; though *Psycho* would be subject to three sequels and a remake, it is *The Birds* that might be most suitable for revisiting. The trend towards franchising movies was just beginning as Hitch delivered his final movie, *Family Plot*, in '76. It's impossible to know if the idea would have appealed to him — apart, that is, from one intriguing clue. The final act of editing that Hitchcock performed on the movie, much to the studio's displeasure, was to remove two words: "The End". **ADAM SMITH**



# Dr. Strangelove Or: How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Love The Bomb

## Or: how Stanley Kubrick defrosted the Cold War and created a classic

**1964** / CERT **PG** / DIRECTOR **STANLEY KUBRICK** / SCREENWRITERS **STANLEY KUBRICK, TERRY SOUTHERN, PETER GEORGE** / CAST **PETER SELLERS, GEORGE C SCOTT, STERLING HAYDEN**

GENERAL JACK D Ripper (Sterling Hayden) sits behind a desk in his shadowy office at Burpelson Air Force Base, an obviously phallic cigar clamped between thin lips. This man has just started World War III. He explains his reasoning to Group Captain Lionel Mandrake (Peter Sellers), a bewildered RAF officer stranded in an alien land by a NATO exchange scheme: "I can no longer sit back and allow Communist infiltration, Communist indoctrination, Communist subversion, and the international Communist conspiracy to sap and impurify all of our precious bodily fluids." Stanley Kubrick bought the rights to Peter George's 1958 novel *Two Hours To Doom* (aka *Red Alert*) with the intention of making a serious film about the possibility of accidental nuclear exchange.

As work on the script progressed, Kubrick realised the grim story was turning into a horror-comedy, so he called in satirist Terry Southern to lace the script with his poisonous wit. Whereas most previous films about the subject depicted nuclear war as absurdly tragic, *Strangelove* presented nuclear war as tragically absurd.

Unhinged by impotence, which he puts down to a Commie plot involving fluoridation, Ripper orders his bomber wing to attack the Soviet Union. Ineffectual President Muffley (Sellers again) tries to help his Russian opposite number disable Ripper's plans before they can activate the Russian Doomsday Machine, designed to destroy the world if any superpower launches an atomic attack. One lone plane, under the command of Major TJ 'King' Kong (Slim Pickens), gets through. The film opens



Peter Sellers (centre) asserts himself in The War Room as President Merkin Muffley, one of his three roles in the film.

with Kong's B-52 being refuelled mid-air, the blatant sexual symbolism of jet penetration underscored by a romantic melody, and the apparatus of nuclear defence is only slightly more sexualised than it is in the 1955 propagandist film *Strategic Air Command*. Kong has all the same stubborn ingenuity and patriotic doggedness of the airman played by James Stewart in that film, but these once admirable qualities are now the instruments of Armageddon. There is almost a last-minute reprieve (in the novel, the world is saved) when the bomb bay doors jam, but Kong fixes it all with chewing gum and a few kicks.

The Major is dropped with his bomb, whooping like a rodeo cowboy. As mushroom clouds blossom, Vera Lynn sings *We'll Meet Again*, the song she made famous during World War II. Throughout the movie, ironic references to the earlier war provide a misleading frame of reference for the far more dangerous nuclear game. Mandrake is unable to sort out the difference between the Japanese who tortured him as a POW and the Japanese who are now the West's ally ("The thing is, they make such bloody good cameras!"); cockeyed General Buck Turgidson (George C Scott) uses the war records of Russia and America to contrast Slavic guts with US initiative; and Dr Strangelove (Sellers, yet again), the Pentagon's resident expert, is a crippled ex-Nazi, unable to stop his metal arm from stiffening in a Heil Hitler salute and desire to address the President as "Mein Fuhrer". Because these men refuse to see warfare has changed, the world ends.

Much of the agonising humour of *Strangelove* comes from an escalation of minor idiocies into unpreventable apocalypse: hawkish Major 'Bat' Guano (Keenan Wynn) is unwilling to shoot a Coca-Cola machine in order to get loose change for a phone call which could save humanity; Russian Premier Kissoff has delayed telling anyone about his ultimate deterrent because he wanted to save the surprise for an upcoming Party Congress. The final proof the world is totally crazy comes when the President finds Turgidson and Russian Ambassador de Sadesky (Peter Bull) scuffling over a spy camera and declares, "Gentlemen, you can't fight in here... this is the War Room!" While these moments reveal comic invention, other funny details ring horribly true: a report on a desk labelled "World Targets In MegaDeaths" (a rare grammatically correct use of the prefix "mega"); Strangelove's survival plan, which involves establishing harems for VIPs at the bottom of mineshafts; and an SAC emergency kit which includes a gun, nylons, gold, chewing gum and a "miniature combination Bible/ Rooshian phrase book".

For all its comical exaggerations, the characters of *Strangelove* are horribly close to their real-life equivalents. Turgidson represents General Curtis LeMay, and Ripper LeMay's replacement at SAC, General Thomas Power, whose extremism caused even his predecessor to "worry that General Power was not stable". Though based on a novel published in 1958, the War Room discussions remarkably parallel debates held in secret by President Kennedy's ExComm group during the Cuban Missile crisis of October 1962. The most unnerving similarity is that Kennedy's advisors, like Muffley's, urged him to a first strike against Cuba, unaware that retaliation-capable nuclear weapons were already installed on the island and that a tactic supposed to assure a swift US victory could have led to devastating all-out war.

Despite the despairing theme, it's still among the funniest films ever made — and, in his three roles, Peter Sellers delivers several classic speeches that will live forever. Most notable is the President's attempt to explain things to a tipsy Soviet premier over the hotline like an adult trying to get through to a dim, obstreperous child, not to mention Strangelove's cracked analyses of the possible benefits of the situation (it takes multiple viewings to notice that Peter Bull comes close to laughter several times during this speech). Sellers, reteaming with Kubrick after *Lolita*, never found as congenial a director again.

*Strangelove* isn't as truthful about the nuclear face-off as, say, Peter Watkins' 1965 TV movie *The War Game*. It's about the failings of the soldiers, politicians and scientists we put in charge of our survival. Sidney Lumet's *Fail-Safe*, which came out the same year and offers a parallel storyline, exonerates the men in office and uniform, blames its crisis on simple mechanical malfunction and suggests that self-sacrifice and compromise will avert the end of the world. Kubrick's film will have none of this. The lesson of *Strangelove* is that the bomb can't be disinvented, so anyone who wants a future should focus instead on getting rid of megalomaniacs like Generals Ripper and Turgidson, ineffectual dolts like Muffley and Kissoff, would-be heroes like Majors Kong and Guano, and barely human theorists like Strangelove. The sad thing, all these years later, is we still have too many politicians and soldiers in positions of power who could be mistaken for Strangelove and company. **KIM NEWMAN**

# The Good, The Bad And The Ugly

## Nix Good and Bad — it's Ugly that gives this Spaghetti Western pep

**1966** / CERT **18** / DIRECTOR **SERGIO LEONE** / SCREENWRITERS **LUCIANO VINCENZONI, AGENORE INCROCCI, FURIO SCARPELLI, SERGIO LEONE** / CAST **CLINT EASTWOOD, ELI WALLACH, LEE VAN CLEEF**

WHEN SERGIO LEONE first asked Eli Wallach to assume the crucial role of pot-bellied bandito Tuco in the follow-up to his Spaghetti Western mega-hit *For A Few Dollars More*, the Actors Studio alumnus wasn't entirely convinced. Not because he'd already portrayed a snarling Mexican rogue in *The Magnificent Seven* — although typecasting was understandably a concern — and not because he took umbrage at being considered suitably repugnant to complete the titular trio of *The Good, The Bad And The Ugly* (at the time of casting, the film was rather less sublimely titled *The Two Magnificent Tramps*). Wallach's hesitation had a more fundamental source: "I was thinking to myself, Spaghetti Western?" the actor recalls of the genre. "That's like Hawaiian pizza!"

Forty years on, Wallach's scoff does seem quaint. After all, just as the ham-and-pineapple Hawaiian is on the menu of any self-respecting pizza joint these days, the phrase 'Spaghetti Western' is now a natural part of our cultural lexicon. Which is quite remarkable when you consider that, despite Italy's oater output amounting to a few hundred titles (typically cheap, violent and minimalist), only four of them properly travelled, each directed by the same portly, prickly Roman: Leone. And, frankly, anyone searching for this trashy sub-genre's finest doesn't need to look beyond Leone. Indeed, they arguably needn't look beyond the very movie Wallach was so dubious about joining. Sure, Leone's next film, *Once Upon A Time In The West*, his four-hour farewell to the American frontier, looms larger with its stately, myth-crunching elegance. But *The Good, The Bad And The Ugly* set the template — and darn it if it ain't just more entertaining.

It's worth remembering that when Leone's first two Westerns, *A Fistful Of Dollars* and *For A Few Dollars More*, hit the States in January 1967, the good ol' traditional 'Hamburger' variety was already off the hotplate and turning tepid. Charlton Heston may have sneered that, "Americans are the only ones who can make Westerns," but both films were a hit precisely because they were alien. With Stateside audiences disillusioned by their nation's involvement in Vietnam and shocked by riotous street-clashes on the homefront, these Italian movies' cigar-chewing anti-hero — branded "The Man With No Name" for the US advertising campaign — said more to Americans about their supposed cinematic heartland than the straight-shooting heroes they'd in fact grown up with.

Leone had hit on something: the hellish, desolate landscapes, the surreal twinges, the grotesque phizogs, the eclectic, catchy scoring, the rampant amorality, the dark humour and the stylish violence made Spaghetti the counterculture's Western of choice. Leone's movies were raw, crazy and brutal, yet thanks to his keen eye, beautiful. And, in his follow-up to the *Dollars* movies, for which studio United Artists had given him a budget four times that of *Fistful*'s, Leone was going to apply his same subversive aesthetic to one of the defining events in American history: the Civil War. The director gleefully rummaged around in history and twisted what he found to optimum effect in his tale of three rival gunslingers — the malevolent, raptor-faced Angel Eyes (Lee Van Cleef), the rambunctious Tuco and, of course, laconic marksman Blondie (the distinctly non-blond Clint Eastwood, working with Leone for the third and final time) — hunting for a hidden stash of gold while the war rages around them.

Thus it was that the real-life Confederate prison camp Andersonville became the film's Union prison camp, ironically named Betterville, where Angel Eyes arranges horrifying beatings for the inmates. "You always get to hear about the shameful behaviour of the losers, never the winners," boomed the



**"THE HELLISH LANDSCAPES AND RAMPANT AMORALITY MADE SPAGHETTI THE COUNTERCULTURE'S WESTERN OF CHOICE."**



Things are looking a little ugly for Blondie (Clint Eastwood).

director to his biographer, Sir Christopher Frayling. "So I decided to show extermination in a Northern camp. This did not please the Americans..."

Actually, it chimed rather well with Leone's US audience — after all, they weren't feeling too happy about their war record circa 1968. Such hawk-baiting cynicism surges throughout. Just look at the uniformed supporting players — all are wounded or crippled in some way. The war, Leone suggests, cuts chunks — physically and spiritually — out of anyone fighting it. Their decay worsens until we come to the awesomely operatic Mexican stand-off climax where Blondie, Tuco and Angel Eyes play out their dance of death at the hub of a circular military graveyard. Here, they stand, eyes locked, in the sands of a Colosseum, three veteran gladiators performing for an unseeing audience of war-dead.

All of which makes *The Good, The Bad And The Ugly* sound like a rather dour experience. But in many ways this film is Leone's breeziest. Certainly, buoyed by English dialogue-writer Mickey Knox's flair for smart one-liners, Eastwood's Man With No Name is lighter and twinklier than in either of the *Dollars* pics. Yet: as he was wryly aware at the time, Eastwood isn't the true star of this film. That would be Wallach, who offers up a virtuoso turn, encouraged by Leone to present the comic relief as protagonist. Together they honed Tuco into a paragon of excess. He eats like a ravenous coyote. He flings elaborate curses. His list of crimes is as long as a gibbon's arm. Hardly surprising he comes to hog the film.

Of course, Tuco isn't the only reason for *The Good, The Bad And The Ugly*'s gritty magnificence, but he's its fulcrum, the swerving line between Eastwood's ying and Van Cleef's yang, the dervish around whom all the masterfully choreographed action whirls. What a gift for the late Wallach (he died in 2014), who must've been well aware he'd never so dominated the screen before, or since. **SIMON BRAUND**



Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway as Clyde and Bonnie.

# Bonnie And Clyde

## And thus, the modern gangster movie was born

**1967** / CERT **18** / DIRECTOR **ARTHUR PENN** / SCREENWRITERS **DAVID NEWMAN, ROBERT BENTON** / CAST **WARREN BEATTY, FAYE DUNAWAY, MICHAEL J POLLARD**

"SOME DAY THEY'LL go down together; they'll bury them side by side," wrote 23-year-old Bonnie Parker, bank robber, public enemy and part-time poet, in her famous ballad issued shortly before she and her boyfriend Clyde Barrow perished in a hail of police gunfire. "To few it'll be grief — to the law a relief — but it's death for Bonnie and Clyde." The romantic fatalism of their story — two doomed kids in love pitted against an uncaring world — has been a recurrent pop culture motif ever since Parker's naive verse turned her and Barrow into the media's original celebrity death catch. From Serge Gainsbourg's glorifying duet with Brigitte Bardot through Tupac and Eminem's fantasy gangsta and Jay-Z and Beyoncé's ode to bling, *03 Bonnie And Clyde*, those seeking to align themselves with the dangerous fringe while maintaining the adoration of the public have always returned to the bullet-riddled romance. It's an us-against-them myth as durable as Jesse James, Brando's leather jacket or the American road movie. Small-town girl, dashing outsider; serve and repeat.

Maybe it wasn't quite so. Rumours persist that the real-life Barrow was bisexual (clock the film's scene in which accomplice CW Moss gazes at him in a suggestion of *ménage à trois*), an inconvenience that would have undermined the Wild West wanderlust of the idealised straight couple. Director Arthur Penn talked screenwriters David Newman and Robert Benton out of such deviant implication, and gave his anti-hero the supposedly more favourable affliction of impotence. "I ain't much of a lover boy," confesses Warren Beatty's Barrow, before qualifying: "I don't like boys." He awkwardly resists the sexual aggression of Faye Dunaway's nymphette Parker; though they later consummate their relationship, the circumstances remain very ambiguous.

It was with trepidation that Penn approached the project. The script had originally been offered to François Truffaut, and then to his peer Jean-Luc Godard, whose own *Breathless* tipped its hat to Bonnie and Clyde's love-on-the-run (one of the more enjoyable tales had Godard proposing to shoot the movie in Japan with teenage leads). Certainly their declining the film could be viewed as a passing of the torch to the maverick flock of new American filmmakers; after this, the 'Movie Brats' would have the mandate to run their iconoclastic, Nouvelle Vague-inspired auteur dreams through the studio system. Penn was openly distrusting of the studios and likely saw parallels between Bonnie and Clyde's battle

with the law and the emergent "youth" culture's decade-defining tension with the establishment.

Though the story had been filmed twice before, the social tumult of the late 1960s made Bonnie and Clyde ripe for youthquake reinterpretation. Just as the Great Depression had fostered a dislike of the law and allowed outlaws and gangsters to capture the public imagination, the 1960s' questioning of authority made icons out of the outsider. Unlike the stoned mysticism of acid-laced contemporaries like *Easy Rider*, however, there was something altogether tougher about *Bonnie And Clyde*: the way it drew upon the tradition of the Great American Outlaw to herald the end of an innocence — as Bonnie and Clyde knew, death was inevitable and ever-present — that predicted the following decade's cynical perspective. As Penn recalled: "It was to start as a jaunty little spree in crime, then suddenly turn serious, and finally arrive at a point that was irreversible."

Still, the movie is as glamorous as it is bleak; funny as it is violent. The carnal appeal of stars with the wattage of Beatty and Dunaway was key; it was Beatty's first film as producer, displaying his gift for vanity management. The twinkle-eyed Hollywood hunk turned irresistible thug; the killer blonde in side-swept mod fringe and beret... their knockout on-screen chemistry, romanticised and almost Southern-fried cartoonish though it may be, proves captive even as their crime spree grows more indiscriminate. Beatty is charming and intuitive, the very model of the volatile drifter who sweeps in to cure a gal's small-town blues.

Similarly, there's a playfulness to the film despite the escalating violence (emphasised by the famously building sound level), as our anti-heroes taunt lawmen and bait the media with antics that wouldn't look out of place in a Keystone Cops farce. The facile surface of *Bonnie And Clyde* is initially disorientating, yet it soon reveals its postmodern colours: one moment we're laughing at Dunaway twirling a lawman's moustache or the goofy rapport between Beatty and Gene Hackman's Buck Barrow, the next we're subjected to bursts of violence, rendered all the more nausea-inducing by the jittery editing rhythm. The flippant dialogue of characters immersed in crime draws a direct line to the comic anachronisms of Tarantino's puppies in *True Romance*, all of *Pulp Fiction* and, most obviously, his story for Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers*. The film's finale is caked in gunfire and splatter, the images of the iconic outsiders abruptly shattered as the bullet-riddled tableau becomes a requiem for misspent youth.

The film was luridly retitled *Bonnie And Clyde... Were Killers!* for its UK release, a cautionary tactic that only served to underscore its anti-authority cachet. Warner Bros dumped it as a B movie onto double-bills in the US, pulling the film in the wake of generally negative, if not hostile, press. Pontificating from the old moral plateau, *The New York Times* fumed that it was "a cheap piece of bald-faced slapstick... as pointless as it is lacking in taste". Then, in her career-making moment, critic Pauline Kael bravely defended the movie, praising the fact that audiences could enjoy the duo's anti-social behaviour without moral justification; thus arguably paving the way for the modern gangster movie. *Bonnie And Clyde* would go on to become a hit; Beatty collected 40 per cent of the gross for his troubles (he'd conceded his fee in exchange); and it was even nominated for the Best Picture Oscar.

And so endures the myth. Thanks to *Bonnie And Clyde*, the facts of the story have been consumed by the romantic allure of cinema, cementing the wrong-for-the-world, right-for-each-other cliché of gangster fantasy as a pop-culture perennial. As long as there are bored rebels without causes there'll be a place for *Bonnie And Clyde*. As the film's tagline put it: "They're young... they're in love... and they kill people." Who hasn't wished they could experience the joy of living without consequences at one time or another? **LUKE GOODSELL**

## "THE BULLET-RIDDLED TABLEAU BECOMES A REQUIEM FOR MISSPENT YOUTH."

## ESSENTIAL OUTLAWS



### HIGH SIERRA (1941)
Humphrey Bogart ascends from second-tier good and into movie legend as a parolled gangster who pulls another job and flees from police into the Nevada mountains.



### GUN CRAZY (1950)
Bonnie and Clyde gender-flipped as Peggy Cummin's sideshow sharpshooter leads John Dali's timid war vet into lust, mayhem and the obligatory final shower of bullets.



### BREATHLESS (1960)
Jean-Luc Godard jump cuts to a new wave of hip crime film, with Jean-Paul Belmondo as a car thief and cop killer in love with pulp fiction and pixie-haired Jean Seberg.



### THE WILD BUNCH (1969)
Sam Peckinpah's blood-splattered tale of an outlaw gang in the Old West polarised audiences with its then — and still — graphic violence.



### BUTCH CASSIDY AND THE SUNDANCE KID (1969)
The lighter side to *The Wild Bunch* has Paul Newman and Robert Redford as the titular bank robbers on the run to Bolivia and one mighty cliff leap.



### VANISHING POINT (1971)
Speed fiend ex-racer Kowalski leads cops in an epic car chase across the highways of America, helped by a superfly blind soul DJ.



### THE GETAWAY (1972)
Sam Peckinpah directs legendary tough guy Steve McQueen as the recently released ex-con on the lam with his wife, played by Ali MacGraw.



# The Dirty Dozen

## Atten-schun! Robert Aldrich gives the world 12 very angry men

**1967** / CERT **15** / DIRECTOR **ROBERT ALDRICH** / SCREENWRITERS **NUNNALLY JOHNSON, LUKAS HELLER** / CAST **LEE MARVIN, ERNEST BORGNINE, CHARLES BRONSON**

LONDON IN THE summer of 1966 was a vibrant crucible of free love, hipsters and flower power. Carnaby Street was the world's most happening retail hub, and The Beatles were about to shake things up with the sonic soundscape of *Revolver*. Oh, and in a studio in deepest, darkest Borehamwood, just north of London, Robert Aldrich was making an anarchic war movie which ended with the fiery mass murder of dozens of imprisoned, helpless men and women. Groovy, baby.

Perhaps because it was made at a time when censorship laws meant its harshness couldn't be expressed in terms of cussing or graphic gore, or perhaps because its impact has been diluted over the years by a succession of cheap, mostly made-for-TV sequels, the *The Dirty Dozen*'s bite has often been disguised by its bark. But what a bite. For this is one seriously angry film.

It's an anger that's not necessarily directed towards the concept of war itself — Aldrich had made his name as director of a number of excellent World War II pictures, including *Attack!* and *Ten Seconds To Hell*, while his final movie prior to *The Dirty Dozen, The Flight Of The Phoenix*, with its central clash between an all-American Jimmy Stewart and the efficiently Aryan Hardy Kruger, was a war movie in all but name.

Writing to *Dirty Dozen* producer Kenneth Hyman, Aldrich stressed that the movie, in which Lee Marvin's Major John Reisman trains a group of condemned war criminals for a suicide mission against a heavily guarded Nazi citadel, should not be seen as an anti-war movie.

And, indeed, *The Dirty Dozen* treats Reisman and his scruffy, scabby subjects with the kind of laudatory respect worthy of true heroes.

Yet *The Dirty Dozen* remains, to all intents and purposes, an anti-war film. Just not an anti-World War II film. Instead, it's an anti-Vietnam War film.

In the mid-'60s, the conflict in Vietnam was like one of those permanent rain clouds that follows characters in cartoons, constantly in danger of blotting out the sun in the Summer Of Love, as Lyndon Johnson stepped up America's involvement and sent thousands of young men to their needless deaths.






**Above:** The Dozen line up for duty. Not that dirty yet. **Right:** Col Everett Dasher Breed (Robert Ryan) is held captive by Joseph Wladislaw (Charles Bronson).

It was this that Aldrich seized upon, using *The Dirty Dozen* as a prism through which to focus a nation's anger. The movie itself doesn't entirely function as a Vietnam analogy, although the notion of training a group of men, most of whom aren't even ready to function in society, much less as soldiers, to go up against an overwhelming foe on a mission which almost guarantees certain death, isn't that much of a stretch. But what it does serve as is a giant middle finger to authority.

In his letters to Hyman, Aldrich stated that Reisman should be the "most cynical, suspicious, sophisticated, anti-authoritarian, anti-establishment, mean, miserable son-of-a-bitch that anybody has ever seen in a movie", and, with Marvin in effortlessly cool form, that's what he gets. From the off, Reisman makes it quite clear why a man of his talents hasn't progressed any further than Major, treating his orders, and the men who give them, with contempt. Throughout the film, Reisman and his Dozen — John Cassavetes, Charles Bronson, Jim Brown, Clint Walker, Trini López, Colin Maitland, Telly Savalas, Donald Sutherland, Al Mancini, Tom Busby, Stuart Cooper and Ben Carruthers — dedicate themselves to making Robert Ryan's Colonel Breed look like a buffoon, while turning their noses up at anyone who tells them what to do.

The film doesn't so much speak truth to power as yell at it until the veins bulge on its neck, and this reaches its apotheosis in the infamous climax, in which the Dozen round up high-ranking Nazis and blow them up in cold blood. Oh, and their wives and mistresses, too. As the trapped Nazis scream for mercy, while Jim Brown's Jefferson grins as he drops grenades onto them, it reveals the extent of the movie's anger — it doesn't matter whether they're men, women or, quote-unquote, innocent. These, Aldrich is saying, are the sons of bitches responsible for the whole sorry mess, and they deserve what's coming to them.

All of which would be lost in time if *The Dirty Dozen* had been just another run-of-the-mill war picture. But the film has achieved its timelessness precisely because it dared to, as Aldrich again stated to Hyman, have its cake and eat it too. It's a movie that makes serious points, but is also entertaining as hell, shot through with a vein of mordant humour, winning performances (Cassavetes, as the tragic Franko, was nominated for an Oscar, while the spotlight was shone on the likes of Bronson, Brown and Sutherland, the last so good that Aldrich requested he be elevated from the "back dozen", the six squad members who were there to make up the numbers, into a featured player) and a seriously good climactic set-piece.

It wasn't the first men-on-a-mission movie, but it has become the genre template for films as disparate as *Uncommon Valor* and *Kelly's Heroes*, while its emphasis on character development and the Dozen's training programme can be seen in the likes of *Full Metal Jacket* and *Inglourious Basterds*. When the latter was first announced, it was presumed it would ape *The Dirty Dozen formula* — recruitment/training/mission — but Tarantino was able to see beyond that to the core of the film: rage.

When, at the end of *Basterds*, Eli Roth and Omar Doom righteously overkill the shredded corpse of Hitler, it captures perfectly the spirit of *The Dirty Dozen*, a film that, in an era fixated on peace and love, came blasting into cinemas in '67 with exactly the opposite in mind. War and hate, baby. War and hate. **CHRIS HEWITT**

# The Graduate

## Still able to seduce you

**1967** / CERT **15** / DIRECTOR **MIKE NICHOLS** / SCREENWRITERS **CALDER WILLINGHAM, BUCK HENRY** / CAST **DUSTIN HOFFMAN, ANNE BANCROFT, KATHARINE ROSS**

IT WAS REALLY no surprise that Mike Nichols could be funny. The bigger surprise had been that he could be dramatic, as he'd been with his first film, *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?*. Funny, however? Funny he knew, and everyone knew he knew. In partnership with Elaine May, Nichols had been half of the most toasted sketch-comedy team in NYC during the early 1960s, holding helplessly convulsing theatre audiences in the palms of their hands until they'd one night just decided they were done, and went their separate ways. What was a surprise, but really shouldn't have been given all that had gone before, was that Nichols could be funny, and make others funny, in a way that people hadn't really done before.

When trying to make an audience laugh in the '60s, the instinct was to go out shooting and waving. Send someone who could sell it, with a face of rubber, eyebrows like somersaulting caterpillars and ideally an inexhaustible range of silly voices. So you had your Peter Sellers, your Gene Wilder, your Jerry Lewis, your "everyone in *It's A Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*". It's a style responsible for many moments liable to induce respiratory problems from excessive laughing. But that's not how Nichols saw things.

Take the story of *The Graduate* — it's that of a dark, twisted drama, the sort of thing you might make if you were French in the '60s and rather intense. A young man with no idea where he fits in the world is bullied into an affair with an older woman, then he falls for the older woman's daughter and ruins her wedding. That is not a comedy plot. But that had always been where Nichols had found comedy, in the gaps between the places everybody else was looking.

Listen to his skits with May and you won't find a punchline, just a build of clever silliness and surreal conflict until they decide they're through (if you've never heard of them, get thee to YouTube). It's the same with *The Graduate*. There aren't really any jokes, and nobody's blatantly playing anything for laughs. Even the most quoted lines — "I've got one word for you... plastics"; "Mrs Robinson, are you trying to seduce me?" — aren't funny in isolation, and to read the script you might not even think it a comedy. But Nichols' gift is for finding the humour in the awkwardness of situations, and staging them in a way that makes that awkwardness absurd, but not to the point that it's slapstick. He's hardly alone, with Woody Allen in particular frequently taking that style and soaring with it to greater heights, but Nichols was just a bit quicker to get there.

The laughs come from the fact that in every scene, someone is uncomfortable and doing very badly in trying to cover it up. Typically, this is Benjamin (Dustin Hoffman). As fortysomething Mrs Robinson (Anne Bancroft) tries to seduce the 20-year-old he attempts to reason his way out of it, seeming ever younger as he tries to appear more mature. When casually trying to book a hotel room for extramarital sex he answers every question incorrectly, fearing the judgement of a receptionist who couldn't care less. None of the words written are by Nichols — they were down to Calder Willingham and Buck Henry — but it's Nichols' choices, like Benjamin looking tiny and meek framed by Mrs Robinson's leg, or accidentally holding hands with the receptionist when trying to silence his bell, that lift the scenes from uncomfortable to hilarious. Even his shots are a bit awkward, with people frequently too close to the camera or slightly obscured by something out of focus.

The casting is genius. With the originally mooted Robert Redford as Benjamin it wouldn't have worked at all. Benjamin is an arse: lazy, selfish and cowardly. He's less deserving of lasting happiness than he is an itchy STD. If he were also good-looking and athletic? Eurgh. It's only because he's played by Hoffman — 30 at the time but perfectly adolescent — that you can even slightly feel for him. You can tell that all this female attention is quite discombobulating, because Benjamin can't even talk to his mother's homely friends without having a mild breakdown. Equally, Bancroft is a much smarter choice than some of the bombshell options considered (Rita Hayworth, Lana Turner).



**"THE THEMES ARE TIMELESS. WE WERE ALL, LIKE BENJAMIN, A BIT AWKWARD ONCE."**

Anne Bancroft's Mrs Robinson and Dustin Hoffman's Benjamin ruminate on forbidden love. Well... lust.

She's a beauty, but she has sad eyes and a weary voice. She doesn't seem like someone thrusting herself upon Benjamin in a fit of sexual frenzy, but a woman who thinks a mindless screw, however inexpert, might be just a little more interesting than another conversation about share prices or the neighbour's new pool. She's a rather desperate seductress, whipping her kit off when her more subtle advances fail, but seems more powerful because her prey is such a dweeb. Everyone in the film is a little bit sad, but it moves too quickly to feel morose. The economy of the storytelling is such that taking out a single scene might deflate the whole thing. There are mere minutes between Benjamin hopping into bed with Mrs Robinson and dating her daughter (Katharine Ross) then realising he's in love with that daughter. It could be this briskness that helps the comedy, leaving no time to dwell.

There is a certain degree of datedness about the film, but it's only really in the sense that it's a snapshot of its time, not in the sense that it doesn't work now. From the Simon and Garfunkel soundtrack to the women stepping outside the confines of marriage to the general feeling of, "Okay, what now?", it's all very late 1960s. But a lot of great films are of a moment, particularly when many that followed copied their template. And the themes are timeless. We were all, like Benjamin, a bit awkward once. We'll all, like Mrs Robinson, at some point wish we were younger. And, as in that final moment on the bus, none of us really quite knows what to do next. **OLLY RICHARDS**

# Once Upon A Time In The West

## Raise your harmonica in salute to Leone's sprawling epic

**1968** / CERT **15** / DIRECTOR **SERGIO LEONE** / SCREENWRITERS **SERGIO DONATI, SERGIO LEONE** / CAST **HENRY FONDA, CHARLES BRONSON, CLAUDIA CARDINALE**

THE CLUE'S IN the title: *Once Upon A Time In The West* is a fairy tale, a mythologised version of the American West, peopled with immediately recognisable archetypes. It's also a commentary on the Western genre itself, and a celebration in the form of a kind of "greatest hits", full of references to other filmmakers and films. From John Ford, George Stevens and Anthony Mann, to *High Noon*, *Rio Bravo*, *The Big Country* and so on.

Spaghetti Western maestro Sergio Leone, along with collaborators like Dario Argento and Bernardo Bertolucci, conceived *Once Upon A Time* as a very different beast from the *Dollars* trilogy that preceded it.

Where the *Dollars* films had built up to a huge, action-packed story of double-crossing, treasure-seeking mercenaries intersecting with the American Civil War in the epic *The Good, The Bad And The Ugly*, *Once Upon A Time* is a much smaller tale.

It's about Jill (Claudia Cardinale) leaving her life as a prostitute in the city to marry the widower McBain, who, she learns on her arrival, has been murdered to get him off railway land. Working against railroad magnate Morton (Gabriele Ferzetti) and his henchman, Frank (Henry Fonda), is Charles Bronson's 'Harmonica', a mysterious figure with a personal grudge revealed in ominous flashbacks. And there's also the rather peripheral Cheyenne (Jason Robards), leader of a group of bandits that Frank has tried to frame for the McBain killing.

More important than the narrative, however, is the style. This is a long film in which it often feels like almost nothing happens. Forty-five minutes pass before all the characters are properly introduced, during which time little transpires, barring Cardinale and Bronson arriving on trains, and Fonda gunning down the McBain clan. Robards just drinks gin and divests himself of a pair of handcuffs.

The justly famous opening credits roll against a backdrop of three gunslingers waiting on a railway platform. Jack Elam is bothered by a fly, Woody Strode catches drips of water in his hat, and Al Mulock cracks his knuckles, for ten minutes, to the sound of a windmill that needs oiling, before all three are shot on Bronson's arrival and never referred to again (Leone's original plan was that the dead men should be Clint Eastwood, Lee Van Cleef and Eli Wallach. The last two were up for it. Eastwood wasn't so amused).

It's an extension of the filmmaking style that created the grandiose gunfight at the end of *The Good, The Bad And The Ugly*, where the players stare at each other in close-ups for minutes on end until the eruption of the final violence.

Here, everyone stares at everyone else for the best part of three hours. It's mad and wonderful. Often called "operatic", Leone himself referred to it as "a ballet of violence". This "art" Western didn't, however, play well in the US, but it was more popular in Europe: you could in fact even still see it in Parisian cinemas six years after its release.

*Once Upon A Time In The West* draws attention to its artifice, and in doing so, draws attention to that of its genre. There's no narrative need for Cardinale to ride through Monument Valley on her way to her new homestead at Sweetwater: it happens because that's what the West looks like in John Ford movies, and was especially what Leone wanted to show off in the mega-widescreen of his cinematographer, Tonino Delli Colli. Ennio Morricone's score was so central to the film's vibe that it was recorded before shooting started and played on set, used to choreograph complicated camera moves.

So the game here isn't originality, but Everything More Iconic Than Everyone Else. Westerns — even great ones — would follow, directed by the likes of Sam Peckinpah, Walter Hill and Eastwood himself, but *Once Upon A Time In The West* still feels like the genre's final word. **OWEN WILLIAMS**



**"OFTEN CALLED 'OPERATIC', LEONE HIMSELF REFERRED TO IT AS A 'BALLET OF VIOLENCE'."**





**Above:** Jill McBain's (Claudia Cardinale) arrival in the Old West town is anything but smooth.
**Left:** In the West, something bad is always about to go down.

It's Rosemary's (Mia Farrow) party and she'll cry if she wants to.

# Rosemary's Baby

## Some mothers do 'ave 'em

**1968** / CERT **18** / DIRECTOR **ROMAN POLANSKI** / SCREENWRITER **ROMAN POLANSKI** / CAST **MIA FARROW, JOHN CASSAVETES, RUTH GORDON**

"YOUR IMMORTAL SOUL will forever burn in the pits of Hell. I will see that you are destroyed. Bastard believer in witchcraft. Lover of Satan. You have unleashed evil upon the world. You have sold your soul and you will die, die, die, die..." Forget, for a moment, the famous tag, "Pray for Rosemary's baby." Following the film's release, it was more a case of pray for the filmmakers. The above excerpt isn't dialogue. It's a death threat. Actually, it's worse — it's an afterlife threat, one of hundreds sent to producer William Castle and director Roman Polanski throughout the summer of '68. Biros sent blazing by the immoral decadence of seeing a good Christian girl give birth to the Antichrist, Catholics across the US blizzarded the makers with hate mail. *Rosemary's Baby* was a huge hit, shot for $3 million and earning back its budget 10 times over, but for those closest to it, success wasn't sweet.

Like *The Exorcist*, *Superman* and *Poltergeist*, *Rosemary's Baby* has a rep as one of Hollywood's great cursed movies. After composing the score, Krzysztof Komeda died of an unexplained brain blood clot, aged 37. Soon after the release, William Castle was struck down by kidney failure. Two months after that, Polanski's pregnant wife, Sharon Tate, was fatally stabbed by Charles Manson's goons. And, after divorcing Frank Sinatra mid-shoot, Mia Farrow was cursed to hook up with Woody Allen.

Like the saying goes, never work with children, animals or organised religion. Is there any truth to the curse? William Castle certainly remained twitchy, especially when John Lennon was killed outside New York's Dakota building, the same spot where the balcony death was shot. Roman Polanski might have delivered it, but *Rosemary* was Castle's baby. A dark clown of the publicity stunt with a fondness for electrocuting his audiences, Castle's tastes were lousy, but he had a strong nose for a hit. It was Castle who brought Ira Levin's unpublished novel to Paramount — on condition he went nowhere near the director's chair. That was already being warmed up for Hollywood debutant, Roman Polanski.

As with all the classic horrors, the premise of the film delivers the essence of evil in pure, simple terms. A young married couple moves into a New York apartment. The wife falls pregnant, only to sense her unborn child is the product of a pact between her struggling-actor husband and her elderly Satanic neighbours. Is she mad? Or is it real? You're never quite certain. Polanski, however, had no doubts about the film's core theme — that evil can visit anybody at any time, a lesson learnt as a kid, dodging Nazi bullets in the Krakow ghetto. *Rosemary's Baby* isn't a film about a monster — it's about a victim, one of the genre's most vivid and vulnerable, a walking wreck of paranoia.

Prior to *Rosemary's Baby*, horror was largely fantastical pulp. Polanski's guiding principle was to make the film's unspeakable terrors utterly tangible. The first half-hour almost plays like an uneasy sitcom about two pesky pensioner neighbours. Don't be fooled. Gradually, within that lucid, logical, slightly farcical reality, a creeping unease upsets the ordered world. By the time Rosemary's hideous revelation hits, your (and Rosemary's) trust is well gone — but you still believe.

Polanski's technique was insidious, effective and innovative — the supernatural presented as super-naturalism, where even a Scrabble board, the reflection in a toaster or a chocolate soufflé can hum with malevolence. The devil's in the details: the takes are long, the editing lingering, the deliberate rhythm one of sleeping danger. It's a film woozy with fear.

More than any other modern director, Polanski, the poet of small spaces, has a talent for building worlds within confined spots — it's the crouching power behind *Repulsion*, *The Pianist*, *Carnage* and, of course, *Rosemary's Baby*. Much has been said of Mia Farrow's predicament symbolising the mania of impending motherhood, but, equally, it's a claustrophobic's worst nightmare. The dark interior of the Black Branford apartment seems to press in as the movie progresses, as if the walls are stealing space, taking air. Cameras intensify the sense of being confined, so often lurking behind Rosemary's shoulder.

"There are 127 varieties of nuts," Polanski once said of his leading lady. "Mia is 116 of them." Few actresses would walk through traffic for their director. Farrow did. Eleven takes. She also ate chicken liver (Farrow's vegetarian). Thirteen takes. Plus a megaton Sinatra divorce. Harrowing performance. Harrowing times.

But she didn't get nominated for an Oscar. Co-star Ruth Gordon, however, won Best Supporting Actress for her mosquito-voiced crone, Mrs Castevet. Like the film, Mrs Castevet always seems on the edge of a delirious cackle. By the end, with its cocktail-sipping Satanists and splendidly random Japanese devil-worshipper ("Heil Set-un!"), we're so neck-deep in evil, Polanski resorts to the only plausible reaction: disturbed, confused, incongruous laughter. But it's covering a scream.

Arguably the film's greatest coup is its total dedication to one of horror's great ignored rules — tell, but don't show. "What have you done to its eyes?" goes the famous line. Good question: what? Shrouded by its black cot, the eponymous devil sprog goes unseen, which, if anything, is a good excuse for a post-movie drawing competition.

*Rosemary's* children are grown up and everywhere now — its influence and disturbed realities are in *The Exorcist*, *The Blair Witch Project* and beyond. As for Michael Bay's planned remake? It stalled in 2009. Be thankful, O Lord, for the curse of *Rosemary's Baby*. **SIMON CROOK**

**"THE DELIBERATE RHYTHM IS ONE OF SLEEPING DANGER. IT'S A FILM WOOZY WITH FEAR."**

# The Wild Bunch

## A brutal elegy for the Old West that refused to indulge in nostalgia

**1969** / CERT **18** / DIRECTOR **SAM PECKINPAH** / SCREENWRITERS **WALON GREEN, SAM PECKINPAH** / CAST **WILLIAM HOLDEN, ERNEST BORGNINE, ROBERT RYAN**

"WE'VE GOT TO start thinking beyond our guns. Those days are closing fast," muses William Holden, not long after the bloodiest shoot-out 1969 audiences had ever seen. Minutes earlier, a bank robbery in the small town of Starbuck had descended into chaotic carnage, with Holden's Pike and his titular Wild Bunch forced to shoot their way out of an ambush, catching a good proportion of unarmed, hymn-singing churchgoers in the deafening, blood-spurting crossfire. That the Bunch never get to the point where they abandon violence and start living up to their oft-spoken ideals is the great tragedy of the film; an epic about failure that manages to be both nihilistic and romantic at the same time.

*The Wild Bunch* began life as a vehicle for Lee Marvin (who passed in favour of *Paint Your Wagon*), and was greenlit in 1967 in the wake of the hugely successful *Butch Cassidy And The Sundance Kid*. According to legend, *The Wild Bunch* was Cassidy's gang of murderers and scumbags who cared little for whomever got in their way. William Goldman's screenplay for George Roy Hill's nostalgia-fest had played up the Robin Hood aspect of the Cassidy myth; that he never killed a man and never broke his word. lt glossed over the idea that other people had done Cassidy's dirty work for him.

Sam Peckinpah's vision, expanded from a treatment by Roy Sickner and Walon Green, would be altogether different. Replacing Butch and Sundance with Pike Bishop and Dutch Engstrom (Ernest Borgnine), *The Wild Bunch* begins with the massacre in Starbuck, after which the Bunch flee to Mexico to shake off the pursuing posse led by "Judas goat" Deke Thornton, Pike's ex-partner. After finding that the bank robbery was a set-up and they've stolen nothing but sacks full of steel washers, they agree to One Last Job, stealing rifles from the US Army for Mexican warlord General Mapache. When a Mexican member of the Bunch, Angel, asks for one crate to be kept aside from the haul so that the people of his home village can defend themselves against Mapache, the rest of the Bunch agree. But Mapache finds out, and is in the process of torturing Angel to death when the Bunch return to his hacienda for one last stand.

The film was brutal, using craggy character actors instead of prettyboy Redfords or Newmans, abandoning traditional sound and editing processes in favour of visionary new ones, and revolutionising the depiction of on-screen violence. Nobody would ride a bicycle in soft-focus, and *Raindrops Keep Fallin' On My Head* would not be heard.

Monty Python's 'Salad Days' sketch, where Peckinpah directs a genteel tennis game in the English countryside as a limb-severing, artery-gushing abattoir, pretty much sums up the director's reputation, but there's more to *The Wild Bunch*, and to Peckinpah, than blood squibs. Like Sergio Leone, Peckinpah's mission was to pay homage to the classic Western whilst at the same time completely eviscerating it. Unlike Leone, however, Peckinpah's Westerns aren't surreal or parodic. *The Wild Bunch* is set in an explicit place (Mexico and the border, as opposed to the mythic Nowhere of the *Dollars* films) at an explicit time (1913, with World War I imminent), and Peckinpah wants us to empathise with these out-of-epoch characters, despite the inarguable fact that, to many, they're self-deluding cold-blooded killers. His great achievement is that he succeeds. Peckinpah's agenda is actually much more conservative than Leone's, or even John Ford's, in that he seems to buy wholesale into the notion that the mythic Old West actually existed.

lt may be 1913 but, south of the border at least, it might as well still be the 19th century, shown in a light that Ford exposed as rose-tinted selective memory in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, but that Peckinpah and his characters seem to cherish. The presence of faded stars like Holden and Robert Ryan reinforces the idea that these characters' best days are behind them — Pike's inability to get on his horse anticipates Eastwood's *Unforgiven* by 23 years — but the characters are constantly making statements that expose their old-school code of honour as a sham. "When you side with a man you stay with him, and if you can't do that you're like some animal. You're finished!" says Pike, conveniently forgetting he just left



**"PECKINPAH'S STYLISED VIOLENCE AT LEAST HAS GENUINE PURPOSE HERE."**

The Wild Bunch: Tector Gorch (Ben Johnson), Lyle Gorch (Warren Oates), Pike Bishop (William Holden) and Dutch Engstrom (Ernest Borgnine).

a member of his gang in the bank to be killed, and shortly afterwards gunned another friend down for being injured to the point of uselessness.

He will later tell Angel that "$10,000 cuts an awful lot of family ties", and claims that "being sure is my business" when he's generally wrong about everything. "We ain't nothing like him," says Dutch of the appalling Mapache, but there's little evidence to back him up, and he himself isn't above using an innocent girl as a human shield in the climactic gun battle.

Despite all the bullshit, though, there is undoubtedly camaraderie between the Bunch members. The generally bleak tone is occasionally lightened for scenes of drinking and harlotry (Peckinpah was, admittedly, no feminist), but even here there's an undercurrent of desperation. There's a lot of laughter in *The Wild Bunch*, but for the most part it's what Montgomery Burns — outside Moe's Tavern with Smithers — gloatingly referred to as "the mirthless laughter of the damned": children laughing at scorpions being eaten alive by ants; Mapache's delight the bullet that killed his concubine wasn't meant for him after all; villagers laughing at Angel as he's dragged behind Mapache's car (there's that damned 20th century encroaching again); Dutch's psycho "now we're screwed" giggle when it becomes abundantly clear that nobody is getting out of this alive; old Sykes' crazed guffaw over the film's final moments.

Peckinpah even refuses the Bunch a heroic death. They don't die in a blaze of glory trying to rescue Angel, but in pointless ignominy avenging the death they failed to prevent, for no other reason than, "Why not?" and because, "It ain't like it used to be, but it'll do," simply isn't good enough.

Peckinpah may have started a trend for stylised violence, but here, at least, it has genuine purpose: "It's ugly, brutalising, and bloody fucking awful," he explained later. **OWEN WILLIAMS**

# A Clockwork Orange

## Kubrick's future shock satire is twice the movie it was accused of being

**1971** / CERT **18** / DIRECTOR **STANLEY KUBRICK** / SCREENWRITER **STANLEY KUBRICK** / CAST **MALCOLM MCDOWELL, PATRICK MAGEE, MICHAEL BATES**

TIME, THAT PESKY tortoise, is forever stalking impertinent imagination. Stanley Kubrick's celebrated instruments of conjecture were as finely calibrated as the Hubble telescope, but unlike his space odyssey, the proto-punk prescience of his 1971 satire is largely lost now. The teenage kicks of Alex (Malcolm McDowell) are still hard to beat, but the grim future they anticipate was (re)*Made In Britain* by Alan Clarke — and others — in Mrs Thatcher's own decade of dystopia.

As fickle fashions change, flock wallpaper and Moog music would inevitably betray the '70s roots of Stanley's sci-fi. Yet this was not a slow, incremental death. Rather, as the new millennium dawned, *A Clockwork Orange* aged almost overnight. A nightmarish vision once considered too painful for the mainstream even to contemplate was suddenly passé.

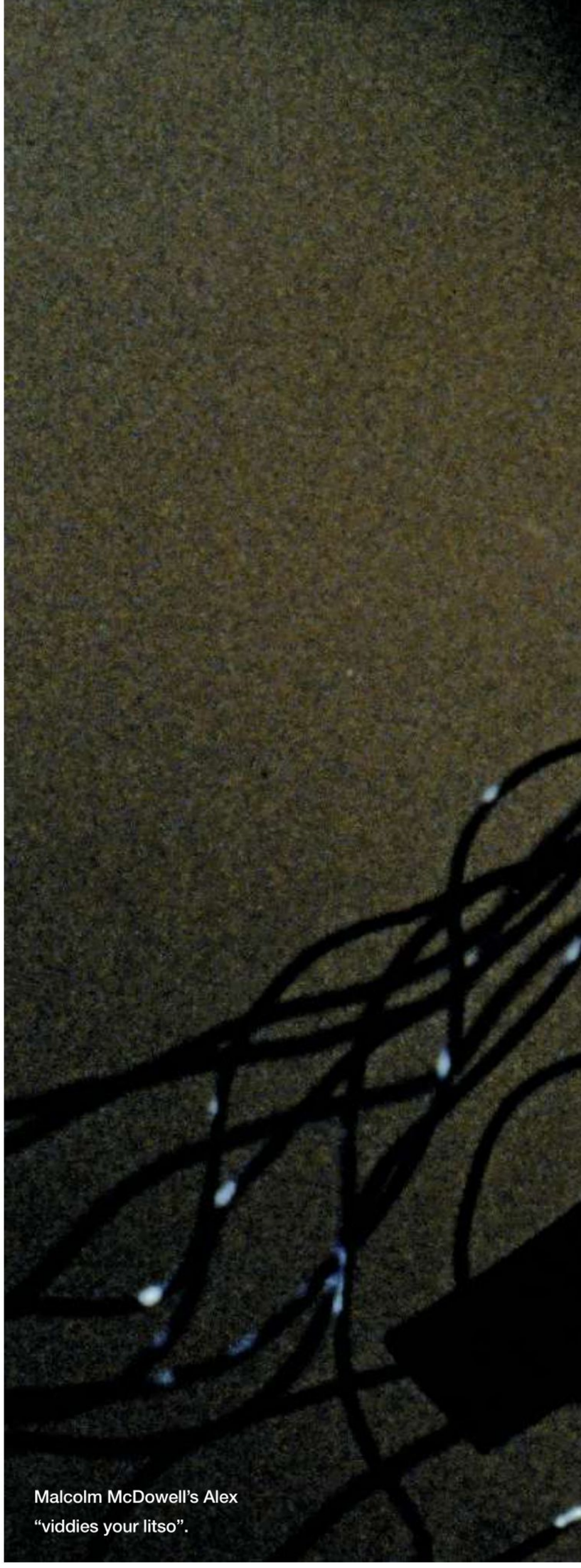
The sin was a simple one: availability. In these bloated days of discounted discs, Kubrick's revelation has become commonplace, offered as additional evidence of his genius. For other directors this might not be an issue, but for Stanley, this was something of a comedown. After all, for 27 years, *A Clockwork Orange* had occupied a singular place in the Kubrick canon: it was the film the director banned. At least in the UK where, between 1973 and 2000, *A Clockwork Orange* acquired quite a mystique. Following a spate of hysterically reported "copycat crimes" and death threats directed at Kubrick, the director withdrew his film. It remained unavailable until his death in '99.

The film of course kicks off in striking Kubrickian fashion: we find Alex and his three droogs enthroned at the Korovo milk bar, Kubrick's camera moving with shark-stillness through the darkness before landing on the single eyelash that launched infinite fancy-dress costumes. If the style has long since been co-opted, time has not dimmed Malcolm McDowell's mischievous glint, just a blink away from murderous. In a movie that draws its seductive power from complicity, the message is clear: Alex has been expecting us. Now the night can begin. As the night bruises and eventually bleeds into day, the collusion continues. Whether he is dunking Dim into the Thames or patrolling a music store dressed as a dandy, Kubrick and McDowell invest Alex with what can only be described as grace. The rival gangs break furniture with all the correctness of the Keystone Cops, but Alex's fists and feet have the precision of a dancer. The implication is obvious: Alex is a natural. You may not agree with his actions, but you can't help admire the purity of his impulses. Or, as the kids say: he's cool.

Although the actions amaze, it is of course language that seals our conspiracy with Alex. *A Clockwork Orange* boasts one of the all-time great first-person narrations in modern cinema, Alex's Russian-flecked cockney is infinitely more inventive than just simple invective.

Written in 1961 by English author Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange* remained relatively obscure until Kubrick's film, and the attendant notoriety guaranteed it would become the first line of Burgess' obituary. Burgess may have bristled at that thought until 1993 (when his death proved it true), but while he never fully embraced Kubrick's film, the testy author complained just as loudly that Kubrick never got sufficient credit for his own contribution to what was recognised as a milestone movie. In essays on film authorship, much ink has been spilled over the spat between author and director regarding Alex's final chapter (quick recap: Kubrick's movie, like the American edition from which it is adapted, excises the moral salvation the Catholic author had fashioned), but in fact the damage inflicted is quite minor. Burgess' final intimation that human nature can evolve naturally is an almost offhand corollary of the book's central thesis that human nature should not be altered artificially, and on that score Kubrick's film is almost doggedly faithful.

In the Staja ("State jail, that is"), Kubrick edges towards Porridge, but dialogue, ideas and even those famous "Ludovico Technique" images are lifted directly from the page. Kubrick rejected Burgess' own screenplay, but it is clear that, as with Arthur C Clarke, and with apologies to Stephen King, he kept his source close by during filming. "Now all the time was watching this," Alex says of the Ludovico brainwashing films, "I was beginning to get very aware of a like not feeling all that well..."



Malcolm McDowell's Alex "viddies your litso".

**"A REQUIRED TEXT FOR TODAY'S HOODLUMS AND TOMORROW'S POLITICIANS."**

This, then, is the Kubrickian Technique. First: draw the eye with violent distractions. Second: shock them with their own thoughts. (Hint: don't tell them what to think, just don't provide any easy answers.) It is more subtle than brainwashing (or even Burgess) perhaps, and, as the controversy proved, a damn sight easier to misread, but it is this very technique that makes *A Clockwork Orange* a required text for today's hoodlums and tomorrow's politicians.

The notoriety, the cultural importance, the prescience, the silly fashions — all of it will fade to grey given enough time. But real rock-solid, can't teach it, can't bottle it technique? Kubrickian Technique. Even the pesky tortoise will have trouble hunting that down. **CHRIS HEWITT**



Alex and his gang on a casual night out.

# The French Connection

## Gene Hackman brings one of cinema's greatest anti-heroes to life

**1971** / CERT **18** / DIRECTOR **WILLIAM FRIEDKIN** / SCREENWRITER **ERNEST TIDYMAN** / CAST **GENE HACKMAN, ROY SCHEIDER, FERNANDO RAY, TONY LO BIANCO**

IN 1971, THE cop movie changed for the uglier and the better. Thrown together, the two characters responsible for this spiky mutation — Popeye and Harry — sound like a renegade puppet outfit from kids' TV and about as tough as fishfingers. Yet Mr Doyle (Popeye) and Mr Callahan (Harry) remain, even now, the base photofit for that corny but still naggingly effective genre chestnut: the rebel cop who doesn't play by the rules.

Before *Dirty Harry* and *The French Connection*, movie cops amounted to little more than sheriffs in civvies, white hat versus black hat with a gumball motor instead of a horse. Growing public unease with the US judicial system soon put paid to that. With crime soaring, offenders were somehow being kid- gloved with increasing leniency. *Connection* and *Harry* were quick to tap in. Hip to the new cynicism, their response was brutally simple: to take the law into their own gunhands.

Similar profiles, then, but stylistically? Different precincts. Both are exceptional movies; only one can lay claim to laying out a legacy. It's all in the grit. From British TV's *The Sweeney* through to *CSI*, it all comes back to *The French Connection*.

The events are based, as the trailer goes, "On An Incredible True Story". Well, sort of. In October 1961, two unlikeable but dedicated New York cops, Eddie 'Popeye' Egan and Buddy 'Cloudy' Russo, broke into a crime ring that resulted in the largest drug haul ever seen — more than $32 million in uncut heroin.

Director William Friedkin would be the first to admit that his version plays fast and loose with the facts — but then, what bumpkin ever let facts get in the way of a good movie? Friedkin was after a different kind of truth: authenticity. A precocious talent who'd risen through the TV ranks, Friedkin was already a respected documentary filmmaker — and *The French Connection*, to him, looked like a documentary that never happened. This bid for authenticity informs everything in the movie: look, location, camerawork, lighting, mood, performance, even the smack (the heroin is real, on loan from the NYPD). *Exorcist* lore celebrates all manner of auteur shit-fits that earned Friedkin his *enfant terrible* rep, so you may be surprised to hear that during *Connection*'s shoot, the phrase that kept popping up from all involved was "great fun". And not one gun to an actor's head. Fun? Let's have some...

A typical day: told the budget won't spread to a traffic jam sequence, Friedkin responds accordingly and, cameraman and cast in tow, nips out to make his own one. The party gets broken up by an NYPD helicopter wondering how two armed police impersonators have caused a three-kilometre bumper-to-bumper nightmare. Friedkin genuinely doesn't understand what the problem is, and asks to borrow the police helicopter.

If all this sounds like a bunch of little boys hoofing around the city playing cops and robbers, well, here's some more. The celebrated chase (so influential that the climaxes to both *Spider-Man 2* and *Batman Begins* are essentially CG remixes) was shot largely on the fly, and was a car crash waiting to happen. Guess what? Car crashes happened. Stunt men in stunt cars missing their marks, civilians on their way to work driving into the chase... And throughout all this, star Gene Hackman doing his own Method driving.

The point being, every pop, bang and wallop of edgy guerrilla energy crosses from street to screen. Friedkin's rough bite of the Big Apple is anti-postcard, the sordid lower East Side and slums of Bed-Stuy lensed in the colour of a cold steel garbage bin. It's the epitome of American urban grit, a look that's resurfaced in countless cop shows — the visual gravel reflecting that tough, uncompromising police procedural. And inspired, of all things, by gay Paris. In order to induce the adrenalised anarchy of the documentary form, Friedkin — with more skill and instinct than any of his contemporaries — called on the spirit of the French New Wave. Specifically, Jean-Luc Godard's maxim: shoot quick, shoot handheld, shoot anywhere (the title is, of course, a *double entendre* — if Friedkin were any more of a Francophile, he'd be an onion).

Friedkin's energy and edginess was just as evident during preproduction, most notably in his dealings with his leading man. Hackman's pitbull turn is one of cinema's most compelling depictions of obsession but, truth be told, the Stanislavski Method Man initially struggled. "Where's his weak side? His compassionate side?" Hackman would protest, struggling to widen the dimensions of his character's




**"VISIONARY STUFF, LIFTING LOWLY GENRE MATERIAL INTO A LEGITIMATE ART FORM."**



Gene Hackman's relentless Popeye Doyle keeps an eye out for any criminals.

anti-social methods. "There isn't any," Friedkin would reply. "He's a monster." Then, to prove his point, he hired some monsters: Eddie Egan and Buddy Russo — the real Popeye and Cloudy. By the time they finished their month of night patrols and drug busts, Hackman and Scheider were making their own (illicit) arrests. And, having witnessed Eddie's fist-and-threat tactics first hand, Hackman soon channelled the monster. Popeye's pursuit is so single-minded, he ends the film shooting at shadows. A monster? Maybe. But it's an obsession shared: watching his extraordinary rendering, it's us who ends up popeyed. Perhaps this explains how a womanising, racist control freak who shoots bad guys in the back and cops in the head gets nominated for the AFI's 44th greatest movie hero. Shouldn't that be *anti*-hero?

Yet as popular as Doyle is, for most *The French Connection* is simply the movie with that car chase. Perhaps the chase is too good — it hogs the limelight. There are better scenes. Want a lesson in how to make a tedious four-hour stretch of police procedure throb like a 160-second epic? Look no further than the garage skit. Buddy and Popeye have impounded a car, convinced there are drugs stashed inside. So they strip it — to the skeleton.

Narratively, it's a pivotal point — but there's a lot more going on than just plot. In fact, it plays more like a methodical but sadistic interrogation, the car literally being broken down, piece-by-piece, bleeding oil. To Popeye, the car represents the adversary he can't get his hands on — so he rips it to pieces. Vitally, the scene jags out of an audacious series of jump-cuts, building up a rhythm of increasing desperation. It nails Popeye's blind obsession and his opponent's cunning, and grips like King Kong's fist. The detail, the dirt, the authenticity: it's visionary stuff, lifting lowly genre material into a legitimate art form. It's the true spirit of *The French Connection*.

Oh, and by the way: Popeye is so-called because he always had an eye open for a criminal suspect — as opposed to his perverse fondness for spinach. Glad we got that one cleared up... **SIMON CROOK**

## ESSENTIAL HACKMAN

### THE POSEIDON ADVENTURE (1972)
Heroics and dog-collars, together at last! Gene's man of God leads his flock to safety through a rising tide of seawater aboard an ocean liner.

### THE CONVERSATION (1974)
More mania and obsession as Harry Caul, the bugger who has a bugger of a time In Coppola's conspiracy film classic.

### FRENCH CONNECTION II (1975)
Or 'Popeye Goes To France'. Hackman's second irresistible fix sees the bullish cop turned into an addict by avenging drug lords.

### SUPERMAN (1978)
Revelling in his unscrupulous side as Superman's arch nemesis and rotten egghead, Lex Luthor.

### UNFORGIVEN (1992)
Hackman hated Westerns — then he read this. Some of the actor's finest work Is here — as is another Oscar.

### THE ROYAL TENENBAUMS (2001)
Confirming his versatility by plugging into his funny bone as the eponymous grumpy old patriarch. In a stupid beret.



# McCabe & Mrs. Miller

## Robert Altman's bleak, moody Western that is like no other in the genre

**1971** / CERT **15** / DIRECTOR **ROBERT ALTMAN** / SCREENWRITERS **ROBERT ALTMAN, BRIAN MCKAY** / CAST **WARREN BEATTY, JULIE CHRISTIE, RENE AUBERJONOIS**

WHATEVER CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY'S take on John Wayne, when *McCabe & Mrs Miller* was released in 1971, he remained synonymous with the Western and a man whose opinion his nation cherished. So when Wayne proclaimed that Robert Altman's unusual Western was "corrupt", many agreed — including Altman himself. Speaking years later to film critic and author David Thomson, Altman said, "With every film, it's just, 'Come look through my window. The way it looks from here is the way it looks to me.'"

Upon the film's release, few wanted to look through Altman's window. *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* opened to a response every bit as frosty as its ramshackle town of Presbyterian Church — a sprawling, snow-stacked slum, hacked from the forests around Vancouver — with audiences bemoaning the film's muffled dialogue and offbeat tone. They couldn't complain about the story; drawn from Edmund Naughton's 1959 novel, it's a simple piece that could have provided the narrative structure for any number of Wayne's films — a loser gambler who falls for a kind-hearted prostitute runs into trouble with a corporation that dispatches a misshapen triumvirate (giant, "half-breed", kid) to unleash misfortune upon him. "Everyone knows that story," said Altman, "so I can deal with the background." But it was this background that was "corrupt". This is no conventional-looking Western.

Producer David Foster brought the project to Altman after seeing an early cut of *MASH*, hearing that the filmmaker, still taking his first steps in the world of features, was looking for a Western that didn't dwell on gun-smoke and glory. With Naughton's novel, they'd unearthed a melancholy tale, one that would unfold away from the Texan deserts. The mining town of Presbyterian Church is a place of rain and mud, every bit as unforgiving as cinema's dusty Western towns, although it looks nothing like them.

The filmmakers built the town frame-by-frame, and it grew during filming. Unusually, Altman shot in sequence, the wind howling through a rain-sodden valley as he opens with McCabe's approach, the gambler-cum-brothel proprietor muttering as he ambles into town.

Warren Beatty's McCabe is a man who thinks small, who beneath his whiskey-fuelled bravado remains isolated. In the words of Leonard Cohen's opening refrain, he "wants to trade the game he knows for shelter". Fate grants his wish in the form of Julie Christie's Mrs Miller, a smart madam.

She thinks big, transforms his business and, even though he's too blind to see it, falls in love with him. It is no surprise that, in a film of mumbled conversation, words and meanings are missed. It's all there for McCabe, but he's too much the fool, too wrapped up in his own insecurities. That is his tragedy.

The story's greatest tragedy, however, is reserved for Mrs Miller. Unlike McCabe, her gaze extends far beyond. She understands her place in this harsh, male-populated realm. She can see McCabe's mistakes long before he can. She offers him a route out, but he refuses. The film closes not with McCabe's death but with Mrs Miller's glassy-eyed opium stupor. For her, the pain will endure.

At the time of filming, Beatty and Christie were lovers off screen, and before the horrors of the film's finale, a tenderness bubbles between them, a cosy pocket of warmth — McCabe's "shelter" from the cold world outside. Theirs is a sweetness that more usually springs along with a bumbling teenage love, and this too is apt; McCabe is immature to the last. Altman believed Christie outshone her superstar beau on screen, and certainly director and star struggled with their own relationship. And yet Altman and Beatty achieve success; the film builds towards McCabe's soliloquy, a tricky proposition on film which they execute beautifully, as he skitters around his bedroom, muttering while loading his gun before his final act.

The clothing is unconventional, too. As Altman pointed out, Europeans conquered the West; it was Englishmen, Irishmen, Italians and Swedes who travelled with all their traditional accoutrements. The film's irregular atmosphere also extends to the cinematography. Outside, the characters get swallowed up by their forbidding environment, but inside they're cast in a yellowy, sepia hue, Altman riskily exposing the undeveloped film to light.

Minimally scored, with three songs from Leonard Cohen's first album, it remains a haunting film. Some think Altman made more accomplished movies, but as an entry in the Western canon, the film offered a different perspective, Altman casting Western mythology in a new, unforgiving light. Those happy to look through his window will see a view of that realm which is like no other. **WILL LAWRENCE**

**Above:** McCabe (Warren Beatty) and — yes! — Mrs Miller (Julie Christie).

# Cabaret

## As good as *The Godfather*?

**1972** / CERT **15** / DIRECTOR **BOB FOSSE** / SCREENWRITER **JAY ALLEN** / CAST **LIZA MINNELLI, MICHAEL YORK, HELMUT GRIEM**



Liza Minnelli in Academy Award-winning form as Sally Bowles.

TWO THINGS HAPPENED the morning after *Chicago* swept the Oscars in 2003. First of all, Academy voters woke up nursing a hangover, blinked blearily into the Californian sunlight and moaned, "Oh God, what have we done?!" And then Bob Fosse stopped spinning in his grave.

Almost everything that is good in *Chicago* comes down to Fosse, a man who died 15 years before its cameras started to roll. As director and choreographer of the show's original stage production, it is his distinctive work that made Rob Marshall look good and helped the film to six Oscar wins from 13 nominations. But at least the history books show that justice was done. In 1973, Fosse's *Cabaret* took eight Oscars from a mere ten nominations. It lost out to *The Godfather* for Best Picture, but Fosse beat Francis Ford Coppola to the Best Director statuette. Bob Fosse 1, Rob Marshall 0.

*Cabaret*'s Oscar hoard tends to be overshadowed by *The Godfather*, perhaps because *Cabaret* is a musical, that most love-it-or-hate-it of cinema genres. Not that it is an ordinary, escapist, song-and-dance extravaganza. *Cabaret* is a film with a heart of darkness, where the characters negotiate the twisting paths of their sexuality and the world they live in slides into a politically repellent abyss.

The film's roots lie in the stories published in *Goodbye To Berlin* by Christopher lsherwood, who spent the late '20s and early '30s soaking up the sexual freedoms of Weimar Germany. These stories became the basis for John Van Druten's stage play *I Am A Camera* in 1951. Four years later, the play was filmed with Laurence Harvey and Julie Harris. This in turn inspired a stage musical called *Cabaret*, with music and lyrics by John Kandar and Fred Ebb, which opened on Broadway in 1966.

Fosse had nothing directly to do with these productions. He had been steadily extending his award-winning reputation as a stage choreographer into the film industry, devising the dance routines in *The Pajama Game* and *Damn Yankees* before making his screen debut as director with S*weet Charity* in 1969. Fosse's first involvement with *Cabaret* came with the 1972 film of the musical, which included major changes from the Broadway hit, most notably the Americanisation of the main female character, Sally Bowles, to accommodate rising star Liza Minnelli.

The movie follows idealistic writer-turned-teacher Brian Roberts (Michael York), who moves into the same Berlin apartment building as Sally Bowles, a singer in the nearby Kit Kat Club. Her seductive advances fail — initially, at least, Brian's interests would appear to lie in a completely different direction — but they become friends However, their relationship is confused by the arrival of German playboy Maximilian von Heune (Helmut Griem), who successfully flirts with them both.

Meanwhile, their friend Fritz (Fritz Wendel) suffers romantic problems because the object of his affections is Jewish — a growing problem for society at large as the Nazis use bully-boy tactics to stir up trouble. Throughout it all, the Kit Kat Club's Emcee (Joel Grey) mischievously orchestrates songs that slip from the "divine decadence" of bohemian life into a more disturbing commentary on the outside world.

The film's Oscar-winning actors, Grey and Minnelli, give stellar performances. Grey brings a wicked and at times sinister edge to the proceedings. Minnelli, meanwhile, belts out her solos but reveals a touching vulnerability during her dramatic scenes.

With big eyes like a wounded doe, Sally is a passionate, fragile, self-deluding creature. After her Oscar win, Minnelli finally began to edge out from beneath the shadow of her mother, Judy Garland.

Like all great musicals, *Cabaret*'s songs are vital to its success. However, unlike many musicals, they actually contribute to the realism of the piece. All of the songs have a logical source on screen, be it the musical routines in the Kit Kat Club or the sound of Sally's record player. The most memorable is *Tomorrow Belongs To Me*, the only number to take place outside of the club and the one folksy song among the cabaret ditties.

Fosse set out to create what he called "a modern-day nightmare in song and dance", and succeeded to the extent that *Cabaret*'s 43-year-old fireworks still feel more relevant than *Chicago*'s damp squibs. The film's final shot says it all. Lurking among the Kit Kat's patrons are several brown uniforms and swastika armbands, distorted in the mirrored walls. Artistic and sexual freedoms are seen as a threat to political domination, and this wonderfully international city has been taken over by National Socialists. As Ms Minnelli would say, that's "Nazi" with a "z". **ALAN MORRISON**

# Solaris

## Sci-fi smarts in Tarkovsky's sublime psycho-drama

**1972** / CERT **PG** / DIRECTOR **ANDREI TARKOVSKY** / SCREENWRITERS **ANDREI TARKOVSKY, FRIDRIKH GORENSHTEYN** / CAST **NATALYA BONDARCHUK, DONATAS BANIONIS, JÜRI JÄRVET**

IF YOU LIKE your sci-fi populated with steroidal Smurfs in 3D, cutting-edge computer effects, exploding planets and deep-space dog-fights, *Solaris*, director Andrei Tarkovsky's adaptation of Stanislaw Lem's celebrated novel, may not be your cup of vivid blue pan-nutritional hyper-sleep drip. If, on the other hand, *2001: A Space Odyssey* has always struck you as a shameless piece of popcorn fluff and the breakneck pacing and gratuitous eye-candy of George Lucas' *THX 1138* gives you a headache, you'd be well advised to head for the nearest Criterion Collection stockist and prepare yourself for a treat.

The film opens with psychologist Kris Kelvin (Donatas Banionis) contemplating his life as he prepares for a lengthy mission to an interstellar space station in orbit around the remote, oceanic planet of Solaris. Things aboard the station have, it seems, gone completely haywire, the scientific study of the planet has been disrupted by an outbreak of severe emotional traumas among the crew. Kelvin has been dispatched to assess the situation, and on the eve of his departure he bids goodbye to his ailing father, sure in the knowledge that he will never see him again.

Once on board the station Kelvin finds the crew beset by disturbing hallucinations, to which he himself soon falls prey. One night, he wakes from a fitful sleep to find his wife, Khari (Natalya Bondarchuk), in his cabin. This comes as a surprise for several reasons. First of all the cabin door is barricaded shut — and Solaris is something of a schlep from Earth in any case — and secondly, because Khari committed suicide several years earlier. Quite unaware that she is supposed to be dead, Khari is, it transpires, a product of Solaris itself, whose mysterious, roiling oceans form an alien energy field that taps into the deepest recesses of the crew's minds, conjuring spectres from their subconscious to haunt them. Thus begins a long, strange journey into the outer limits of the human emotional spectrum, territory rarely explored in such depth by the modern space opera.

Made in the midst of the Cold War with an international energy crisis looming, Solaris is every bit as grim as you'd expect from a Soviet film of the era. The interior of the space station is a cold, forbidding workspace: the control room of a Siberian sewage works rather than the flight deck of the Enterprise. Here there are no granite-jawed jet jockeys (the influence on later Hollywood movies, *Alien* in particular, is immediately apparent); the crew are dishevelled, unshaven and haggard, just as you would imagine them, given their ordeal.

With a running time of 160 minutes, its narrative pace could charitably be called unhurried, even in comparison with contemporary Western movies; judged by today's standards it is positively glacial. But in that lies its power to absorb. Like all great science-fiction it resists sensationalism, exploiting the capacity of an imagined universe — albeit one with its own rigid internal logic — to examine the human psyche in ways not possible in the real world. Lem's novel is a classic of cerebral sci-fi that burrows deeply into the existential long grass. Tarkovsky's adaptation (written by Tarkovsky and Fridrikh Gorenshtein) is no less of a mind-bender. Nevertheless, for all its outward implacability, it has a deeply humanist core, focusing not as Lem does on the inadequacy of science alone to effect communication between alien entities, but on the nature of memory, grief and redemption. The book is set entirely on the space station; the film



begins on Earth, with Kelvin revisiting his childhood home and destroying the mementos of his life in a bonfire. It deliberately sets out all that Kelvin has lost and all that he strives, ultimately, to regain by surrendering himself to Solaris. In the final scene we see him reunited with his father at the lakeside house where he grew up — the house is on an island, a speck adrift in one of the planet's vast oceans. Here, as elsewhere, it touches on the nature of existence itself. Heady stuff indeed.

It would be misleading to say Solaris is an easy film to watch. Aimed at audiences weaned on Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, thus hardened to drawn-out, chilly epics, and unencumbered by the commercial imperatives of Western cinema, it is an unapologetic art film in

**"AN UNAPOLOGETIC ART FILM IN THE SKIMPIEST OF GENRE CLOTHING, BUT AN EXCEPTIONALLY REWARDING ONE."**

the skimpiest of genre clothing (note the Bruegel reproductions that adorn the bulkheads of the space station), but it is an exceptionally rewarding one. Just as the best of Arthur C Clarke, Philip K Dick and Ray Bradbury (to name a few) elevates science-fiction to the level of literature, it's a film that forces non-aficionados to accept that there is more to the genre than second-hand mythology, ray guns and cute robots.

In 2002, Steven Soderbergh made a credible stab at adapting Lem's novel anew. His version, starring George Clooney and Natascha McElhone, was dutifully sombre and respectful of the source material. Still, once you've subjected yourself to the original, it plays like *Spaceballs*. **SIMON BRAUND**

**Above:** Kris Kelvin (Donatas Banionis) discovers a surprisingly animate Khari (Natalya Bondarchuk). **Right:** Solaris, though classic sci-fi, has a deeply humanist core.





# Badlands

## Malick's debut remains a triumph

**1973** / CERT **18** / DIRECTOR **TERRENCE MALICK** / SCREENWRITER **TERRENCE MALICK** / CAST **MARTIN SHEEN, SISSY SPACEK, WARREN OATES**

THE WHOLE EXPERIENCE was magical," said Sissy Spacek, describing the filming of *Badlands*, Terrence Malick's haunting testament to love, obsession and the banality of evil. "It seemed like the centre of the universe. Like nothing else really existed."

Spacek obviously recalls the 1972 shoot more fondly than most people involved. By all accounts Malick, attacking his first film as writer-director with the fervour of a neophyte artist hell-bent on making his mark, was a tyrant — running months over schedule and traumatising his crew to the point where walk-outs became commonplace. But if Spacek's memories are rose-tinted, they certainly capture the essential nature of the film. *Badlands* is magical.

"My influences were books like *The Hardy Boys*, *Swiss Family Robinson*, *Tom Sawyer*," said Malick in his last interview, for *Sight & Sound*, back in 1975, "all involving an innocent in a drama over his or her head. I wanted the picture to be set up like a fairy tale, outside time, like *Treasure Island*." As inspiration goes, it's an intriguingly mixed bag — especially if you know the film — but it produced the desired result. A fairy tale it is, albeit one more dark and insidious than even the *Brothers Grimm* could have imagined.

Based loosely on the real-life case of Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate, two star-crossed teens who murdered their way across the American Heartland in 1958, *Badlands* is the story of Kit Carruthers (Martin Sheen), a hick James Dean-alike with psycho undertones, and his 15-year-old girlfriend Holly (Spacek), a hopelessly naive waif in thrall to Kit's dime-store charisma, equating the violence in him with the rebel chic of her movie idols.

After killing Holly's father (the great Warren Oates), Kit and Holly flee the backwater town that spawned them and, united in a fantasy of outlaw mystique, head for the Badlands of South Dakota and a senseless killing spree that leads, inexorably, to the electric chair.

Several factors account for the film's dreamlike quality. First and foremost is Holly's voiceover narration, an eerily dispassionate commentary that renders the slaughter all the more chilling. Juxtaposing moments of horror with mundane details of everyday life and the romantic clichés she cribs from fan magazines, the effect is indelibly unsettling — it's as if, reading from the pages of a teenage girl's diary, she is at once utterly detached and intimately involved. "Dad found out I'd been running around behind his back," she says, with sing-song lack of emotion. "He was madder than I'd ever seen him. As punishment for deceiving him, he went and shot my dog."

The second is Tak Fujimoto's superb cinematography, which accentuates the desolate landscape and suffuses proceedings with gauzy, other-worldly light. If you've only seen Malick's *The Tree Of Life*, this is what his eye-catching visuals feel like tied to a more linear story.

The third, and least mentioned, is Malick's refusal to dwell on period detail. The film is rooted in the 1950s but, resisting a temptation most filmmakers would have bowed to, Malick shuns ostentatious displays of Americana — the gas stations, diners and bright-red Coke machines so beloved of Oscar-hungry production designers. Without nostalgic clutter, the story has the power of myth, unfolding in its own unique territory, a faint remove from the real world — "out of time", as Malick intended.

Malick was a protégé of Arthur Penn, who he thanks in the end credits. It's tempting, then, to play up the parallels between *Badlands* and Penn's *Bonnie And Clyde*, itself a landmark movie and another tale of thrill-kill lovers on the run. But it's where the films differ that reveals *Badlands* as the more enduring and ultimately rewarding. *Bonnie And Clyde*, for all its groundbreaking technique, graphic violence and championing of the anti-hero, is brash and exuberant, fuelled by star power and steeped in Depression-era trappings. In contrast, *Badlands* is lyrical and undemonstrative, an impassive glimpse into the shadows of human nature. Where Penn's moral stance is ambiguous, Malick's — if he takes one at all — is an enigma.

When *Badlands* premiered at the New York Film Festival, it attracted even more critical attention than Scorsese's *Mean Streets*. "One may legitimately debate the validity of Malick's vision," wrote Vincent Canby, "but not, I think, his immense talent. *Badlands* is a most important and exciting film." On what grounds you might debate Malick's vision isn't clear, but Canby was right in all other respects. *Badlands* is one of the most important American films of the 20th century, and it announced Malick as a director of ferocious and singular filmmaker. **SIMON BRAUND**

**Above:** Holly (Sissy Spaceck) and Kit (Martin Sheen) join the chain gang.

# Don't Look Now

## The man who fell to Venice

**1973** / CERT **15** / DIRECTOR **NICOLAS ROEG** / SCREENWRITERS **ALLAN SCOTT, CHRIS BRYANT** / CAST **JULIE CHRISTIE, DONALD SUTHERLAND, HILARY MASON**

VENICE IS A CITY like no other. Decay and splendour sit side by side within a maze of narrow pavements and canals. Tiny streets lead to sudden dead-ends, and forbidding churches loom into sight around every unexpected corner. Footsteps bounce off centuries-old stone, echoes deadened by the water, even though the streets appear to be empty.

In *Don't Look Now*, Venice shows its dark side. This isn't the Venice of tourist brochures, but of back-alleys caught in the weak light of winter. It's here that husband and wife John and Laura Baxter (Donald Sutherland and Julie Christie) come shortly after the death of their daughter, Christine. As John begins the restoration of a Byzantine church, Laura meets an odd pair of English sisters, one of whom is blind but has psychic powers. She "sees" Christine happily sitting between her parents in a restaurant, but warns Laura that John's life is in danger if he stays in the city. Meanwhile, a series of murders have been confounding the Italian police. Is the small, red-coated figure John has seen scurrying into the shadows a vision of his dead daughter or a killer at large?

An Anglo-Italian co-production, *Don't Look Now* came out when British cinema was overshadowed by a resurgent Hollywood. In America, 1973 was the year of *Mean Streets, Badlands*, *The Sting* and *The Exorcist*. Despite a few honourable exceptions, the UK industry was caught between its "kitchen sink" glory days of the 1960s and the low-budget renaissance brought about in the '80s. That said, there was no greater visionary talent on British soil in the 1970s than Nicolas Roeg.

*Don't Look Now* remains the most approachable film from Roeg's artistic peak. It is simultaneously a textbook exercise in film grammar and an unsettling, engrossing psychological thriller. The source material puts flesh onto the bare bones of a short story by Daphne Du Maurier, a favourite of Hitchcock, who turned three of her tales — *Rebecca*, *Jamaica Inn* and *The Birds* — into movies. Roeg and his screenwriters, Allan Scott and Chris Bryant, aren't averse to falling back on some Hitchcock MacGuffins, throwing in red herrings and plot tricks to confuse audience perceptions and increase the narrative's mystery. What is the significance of the sisters' photographs? The ornate brooch? There are no correct answers. Beneath the film's intellectual surface lie the fun and games of a thriller, and Roeg caps them all with an ending that's as shocking for first-time viewers as *Psycho*, *Carrie* or *The Blair Witch Project* (whose final enigmatic image owes a clear debt to the climax of *Don't Look Now*).

As a former cinematographer, Roeg is led by his visual sense and so treats Venice as a unique physical space. But he's also interested in the concept of time, and it's his treatment of chronology that lifts the film above the level of a mere thriller. You can question the wisdom of a grieving couple choosing Venice of all places as an escape from the memory of their daughter's drowning, but it is clear that the loss of a child is having such a corrosive effect on the Baxters' marriage that time itself is falling apart. John and Laura have different ways of coping with, and succumbing to, the power of grief. He believes that he has some control over time by restoring a crumbling church to its past glory. She clutches desperately to a supernatural kind of faith — that the dead are still with us.

Roeg shatters their grip on reality in the editing suite. Flashbacks are triggered by emotional memories — cutting from the glint of sunlight on a canal to the rain on a car window at Christine's funeral — rather than plot logic. Visual symbols are established early on, then echoed through the film. Take the colour red: in the opening sequence, Christine dies wearing a red raincoat, the same colour as the hooded figure sitting in a church in the photographic slide her father is studying. Later, red reinforces the link between Christine and the killer, between John's premonition and spilled blood. Roeg links the past and the future, sealing John's fate.

Bold editing also distinguishes the film's sex scene. Directly ripped off by Steven Soderbergh in *Out Of Sight*, its infamy was assured by rumours that, driven by their offscreen affair, Christie and Sutherland did it for real. It's certainly an explicit sequence, but one that conveys a level of intimacy rare in cinema. Roeg contextualises the sex with everyday details. Here is a married couple who are comfortable with a shared nakedness that's far removed from film-star nudity, where Christie's hand on Sutherland's back becomes a caress, not a calculated act of seduction. Roeg cuts the before, during and after together so that making love literally becomes part of a bigger relationship.

*Don't Look Now* was overlooked at award ceremonies, and its more European approach to film language didn't exactly influence the British films that followed in its immediate wake: *Don't Look Now*'s sex scene in 1973, *Confessions Of A Window Cleaner* in 1974. However, there aren't many films that more perfectly shatter a story, scatter the clues and reassemble the complete picture only at the very end. In this way, *Don't Look Now* was decades ahead of *21 Grams*, *The Sixth Sense* and *The Others*, even if it avoids their closed endings in favour of encouraging further questions. Ultimately it is a film best enjoyed as an abstract experience rather than a conventional narrative. It is soaked in an atmosphere of menace that you can't quite put your finger on, where a definitive meaning remains as elusive as the source of those footsteps echoing alongside a lonely canal. **ALAN MORRISON**



John Baxter (Donald Sutherland) is struck by tragedy.

# Chinatown

## "Forget it, Jake, it's Chinatown"

**1974** / CERT **15** / DIRECTOR **ROMAN POLANSKI** / SCREENWRITER **ROBERT TOWNE** / CAST **JACK NICHOLSON, FAYE DUNAWAY, JOHN HUSTON**

EVER FASCINATING, DARK, sophisticated and compelling, *Chinatown* endures as one of the greatest films of the 1970s and one of the all-time great Hollywood movies. Despite being trounced at the Academy Awards in a year dominated by *The Godfather Part II* (*Chinatown*'s heady 11 nominations yielding but one win, for Robert Towne's screenplay), this is a film aspiring screenwriters and directors study for its perfection. Indeed, Towne's long international repute as screenwriting maven rested heavily on this script, written specifically for his friend Jack Nicholson and bankrolled by bad boy producer Robert Evans.

It is an LA story of the 1930s: inspired by the real machinations over land and water rights in developing Los Angeles, and the first in what Towne intended as an historical LA trilogy, it is a conspiracy noir thriller of power, politicking and corruption, and a complex, hard-boiled detective mystery in the Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett tradition. Nicholson's private eye, JJ 'Jake' Gittes ("Discreet Investigations"), is sleeker, more dapper, more humorous, more physical, quicker to anger and more prosperous (with two associates in Duffy and Walsh, as well as the obligatory good secretary) than Chandler's Philip Marlowe or Hammett's Sam Spade.

At the same time, he is more alienated. Jake is a former cop haunted by the veiled past, which climaxed in a never-specified crisis when he worked LA's Chinatown beat. Elusive references to the district dot the film, but the most that is ever drawn from Jake on the subject is that, "I was trying to keep someone from being hurt. I ended up making sure that she was hurt." Thus the intriguing, enigmatic title — only in the film's final minutes do the principal characters, in a fateful convergence, get to Chinatown — stands for failure, bad luck, and being out of your depth in something you don't understand. It also hints at the disaster to come.

Jake is hired by a dolled-up broad, Mrs Hollis Mulwray (Diane Ladd), to surveil her allegedly straying husband, the prominent chief engineer for the city's water and power department. He gets suggestive dirt on Mulwray and a young, blonde mistress stashed in a love nest, but he swiftly receives a rude awakening when the real, and really outraged, Evelyn Mulwray (Faye Dunaway) appears in his office. When Mulwray and a homeless man who had been living in a dry storm drain are both found drowned in the middle of a drought, Jake discovers water is being secretly diverted and digs up a property scam in which nursing-home residents and dead men are the nominal owners of a new empire.

Jake persists in investigating further as intimidation and corpses mount because he doesn't like being made a fool of, which leads him to bluff tycoon and chief villain Noah Cross (John Huston) — Evelyn's father — and draws him inescapably into a catastrophe of greed, murder and incest in the mean streets, flashy Spanish-style homes and orange groves of 1930s Los Angeles.

Towne was a native Los Angelino and informed his script with a love for the town and a nostalgia for its coming-of-age, a time when the desert city grew in order to come to where the water was. And water is everywhere throughout the film, from the ocean where tons of it are being dumped to the reservoirs Jake circuits, the garden pond that holds a vital clue and a tap dripping in a murdered woman's kitchen. It is the key to great power and wealth, the tool of insatiable greed and ambition.

Gittes is one of Nicholson's most fully realised characterisations, which is saying something. However slick and cynical he is, Jake is contemptuous of duplicity, is fundamentally decent and proudly says, "I make an honest living." Genuinely struggling to understand Cross' greed and casual attitude to evil he implores him, "Why are you doing it? How much better can you eat? What can you buy that you can't already afford?"

Towne got the Oscar laurels, but Roman Polanski's direction is inspired and note-perfect, bringing to a smart and complicated narrative a great and disturbing vision. It was he, with his own terrible intimacy with tragedy and evil, who toughened up the script, most memorably changing Towne's original ending (where Evelyn and daughter Katherine get away) to the bitter, unforgettable conclusion that leaves Jake in shock and the viewer helpless, impotent, devastated. Polanski also observed with sharp but humane perception the film's assortment of



**"THE CONCLUSION LEAVES THE VIEWER HELPLESS, IMPOTENT, DEVASTATED."**

Jack Nicholson is super-smooth as JJ 'Jake' Gittes. **Below:** Nicholson and Faye Dunaway (as Evelyn) enjoy a moment.

oddballs, wrong-doers and victims — the coroner with a hacking cough, the distressed farmers, the weaselly little spiv ("Where'd you get the midget?"), played, of course, by Polanski himself, who slits Jake's nose.

Cooly elegant as Evelyn, Faye Dunaway's neurasthenic quality has never been better exploited than by Polanski. But it's still Nicholson's show, his presence as the wisecracking, would-be heroic snoop unspoilt by the ignominy of sporting a bandage over his nose for much of the film.

The belated second part of Towne's trilogy, *The Two Jakes* (1990), is set in the 1940s and replaces water with oil as the city's most coveted resource. Its comparative failure put paid to the proposed third instalment. Never mind. We'll always have *Chinatown*. **ANGIE ERRIGO**



# The Texas Chain Saw Massacre

## Tobe Hooper's *Saw* '74

**1974** / CERT **18** / DIRECTOR **TOBE HOOPER** / SCREENWRITERS **TOBE HOOPER, KIM HENKEL** / CAST **MARILYN BURNS, EDWIN NEAL, ALLEN DANZIGER**

IT'S EASY TO scoff at the weight of cultural significance so often foisted on sci-fi and horror films — chin-stroking cineastes, seemingly oblivious to the films' primary objective (ie to scare the pants off folk), teasing out as many metaphors for this, parodies of that and references to the other as they can. It sometimes seems like an intellectual pissing contest, an "I see your Cold War paranoia and raise you post-Watergate disillusionment" game of bluff and counter-bluff. One imagines the filmmakers reading such highfalutin guff with a wry chuckle, as they prepare to disembowel another comely co-ed in yet more ingenious and gut-churning fashion.

Sadly for the cynics out there, sci-fi and horror films, whether by accident or design, do tend to reflect time and place — particularly the unpleasant aspects of them — with uncanny precision. There is nothing accidental about *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*'s evocation of America life in the early 1970s, however. The prototypical story of a group of teens menaced by a monstrous entity, it is, arguably, the most brutal and uncompromising indictment of an era ever committed to film.

It begins with an on-screen scrawl claiming that the events about to unfold were true (they were not, although they were based loosely on the exploits of serial killer Ed Gein). This was not a ploy on director Tobe Hooper's part to attract







**“THE MOST UNCOMPROMISING INDICTMENT OF AN ERA EVER COMMITTED TO FILM.”**

**Above:** Gunnar Hansen as monstrous killer Leatherface. **Top right:** Revving the titular saw. **Above right:** When it’s man versus heavy power tool, there can be only one winner.

the prurient interest of potential audiences (although it didn’t do any harm on that front). It was a direct response, as Hooper put it, to being “lied to by the government about things that were going on all over the world”, particularly “the massacres and atrocities in Vietnam”. Appalled by the “lack of sentimentality and brutality” of the media coverage — “brains spilled all over the road” — he concluded that man was the real monster, concealed behind a mask. “[That’s why] I put a literal mask on the monster in my film,” he said.

Still, the mask worn by Leatherface, the film’s hulking, (power) tooled-up maniac, played by Gunnar Hansen, is far from one of complacency. A roughly stitched cowl of human skin, it is the implacable face of evil — the true face, it might be said, of those wielding mechanised slaughter against the people of Vietnam and Cambodia. That might be pushing things, but in Leatherface and his family of drooling cannibals — a swipe, as *Empire*’s horror expert Kim Newman has noted, at the most sacred of American institutions and its symbolic sit-com incarnation — the juxtaposition of atrocious acts and the veneer of domestic normality, grotesquely parodied though it is, makes the point with crystal clarity.

That said, *Chain Saw*’s allegorical prowess, and Hooper’s eagerness to tear Big Brother a ragged new one, would count for nought if the film didn’t do what it said on the tin. It does, and then some. Just as *Animal Farm* works as a charming, rustic fable even if you don’t know Joe Stalin from Joe Pesci, so *Chain Saw* works as a sledgehammer blow to the senses even if the names Tricky Dick, Henry Kissinger and Robert McNamara mean no more to you than Larry, Moe and Curly. It’s a relentless, nightmarish assault that rips into the cerebral cortex with brute force and takes up gnawing, uneasy residence. “Nightmarish” is a word debased by over-use, but here it is entirely justified. The skewed angles, abrupt bursts of disorientating light and, as one commentator put it, aural pandemonium (the shriek and grind of the slaughterhouse was embedded into the soundtrack) are what very, very bad dreams are made of. This is compounded by the hold it takes on the subconscious. With what must be considered touching optimism, Hooper kept excessive blood-letting to a minimum in the hope of securing a PG rating (not wishing to contradict the bit about the tin and its claims for the contents within, but only one person is massacred with a chainsaw), and the effect, relying as it does on imagination to fill in the unthinkable blanks, is more terrifying and disturbing than any amount of screen gore that has since been splattered in its wake. The final chase, as Leatherface chases a screaming Sally (Marilyn Burns), is as trauma-inducing as cinema will ever be.

There’s no doubt that *Chain Saw*’s frenzied production also made a contribution. To save money on rented equipment, Hooper shot the film in four weeks, working his cast and crew for 16 hours a day in the blast-furnace intensity of a Texas heatwave. Hansen remembers having to wear the same unwashed shirt every day for a month; there was no money for a second costume and it was feared that laundering it might change the colour. By the end of the shoot it was so caked with blood, it virtually stood up by itself. Edwin Neal, who played the Hitchhiker, recalled that shooting the infamous dinner scene, the family’s sweltering dining room splashed with abattoir blood and festooned with the rotting corpses of roadkill animals, was worse than serving in Vietnam. Particularly the stench of rotten flesh.

Whether *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* was ever viewed by the architects of that particular American adventure — Kissinger, McNamara and their realpolitik cronies — we’ll never know. If it was, we can only hope that the abiding image of Leatherface, silhouetted by the flaring sun, his chainsaw lofted high like an executioner’s blade, caused them, even for the briefest moment, to ponder who the real monsters were. **SIMON BRAUND**

# Nashville

## Altman's complex paean to politics and country pop

**1975** / CERT **15** / DIRECTOR **ROBERT ALTMAN** / SCREENWRITER **JOAN TEWKESBURY** / CAST **KEITH CARRADINE, KAREN BLACK, RONEE BLAKLEY**

FRANK ZAPPA ONCE famously (and rather fatuously) remarked that writing about music is like dancing to architecture. He'd obviously just read the reviews of *Lumpy Gravy*. Still, had he switched mediums and limited himself to this, Robert Altman's kaleidoscopic masterpiece, set against the lurid backdrop of America's C&W city, he might have had a point.

*Nashville*, like *2001: A Space Odyssey* or David Lynch at his most Lynchian, is a film that is most rewarding when you surrender yourself to it, when you accept its loose, labyrinthine structure and become immersed in its myriad plotlines and crowd of principal characters — 24, no less, all afforded fairly equal narrative consideration, an extraordinary feat of orchestration on Altman's part. It all makes perfect sense at the time — it's America in microcosm, right? But when you come to articulate its themes and subtexts, to get to grips with exactly what it has to say about the state of the Union in the early 1970s (a tumultuous time, to be sure), the written word seems woefully inadequate. It's like trying to explain a joke. A brief summary of the 'plot', for instance — various figures pursuing various goals converge on Nashville in the days leading up to a political rally — tells you as much about the enriching experience of watching the film as the track listing of *Sgt. Pepper* tells you about the music residing in its grooves. It culminates in a relatively conventional tragedy — an assassination, albeit of the wrong person — but beyond that, all bets are off.

Although it attacks it obliquely rather than head-on, the political circus is clearly *Nashville*'s primary target. The film was born from Altman's obsession with the dirty politics of the Nixon regime and the fiasco of Watergate (during casting he could barely be dragged away from his hotel TV, so engrossed was he in the Watergate hearings). In 1973, during the filming of *Thieves Like Us*, Altman had been offered a project set in Nashville which he turned down. Nevertheless, the setting intrigued him, even though he knew nothing about the place or the culture of country music. Feeling intuitively, however, that there was a story there, he dispatched his script supervisor Joan Tewkesbury to Nashville, instructing her to keep a diary in the hope that something useful would emerge. It did. On one particularly colourful night at a club called The Exit/In, after copping a joint from a self-confessed murderer while a girl OD-ed at a neighbouring table, Tewkesbury stumbled into the night to behold a full moon. "Shit," she decreed. "Everything runs in circles in this town. Fuck it, this is it. It's all about overlaps and connective tissue. I got it. It was a poem..." Which is as astute a description of *Nashville* as exists; it is a poem, an epic one, sprawling, interweaving and untidy — vintage Altman. In fact, definitive Altman.

Tewkesbury's diary formed the basis for her mammoth 175-page original script, which was augmented by Altman (he added the assassination; Tewkesbury hated it) and, subsequently, freely improvised on by the cast. *Nashville* is a magnificent ensemble piece, but several performances are outstanding: Geraldine Chaplin as a pathologically shallow BBC reporter; Ronee Blakley as a fragile, fledgling country singer; Shelley Duvall (who also starred in Altman's *Thieves Like Us* and *3 Women*) as a displaced LA bimbo; Keith Carradine as a soulless country rock hunk.

"The picture says, 'This is what America is,' and I'm part of it," wrote Pauline Kael in her *New Yorker* review, published in March 1975 and based on an early rough-cut. "*Nashville* arrives at a time when America is congratulating itself for having got rid of the guys who were pulling the wool over people's eyes.



The movie says it isn't only the politicians who live the big lie — the big lie is something we're all capable of trying for." Typically, Kael gets to the heart of the matter (America in microcosm etc), but there's a jarring note, and it's not that she ends a sentence with a preposition. In 1974, far from congratulating itself over ousting Tricky Dick & Co, America was licking its wounds from the double whammy of Vietnam and Watergate, learning the art of collective denial while its cities crumbled and its industrial heartland withered and died. It's a vision granted by hindsight, but it's one that accords with the America of Altman and Tewkesbury, a place where, revealed for the cesspit it is, politics was already dressing itself up as show business. And it's further tribute to Altman's acuity that he recognised Nashville, with its star-spangled, corn-pone hokiness, as the perfect venue for that. Hollywood

**"THIS IS AN EPIC POEM, SPRAWLING, UNTIDY. IN FACT, DEFINITIVE ALTMAN."**

**Above:** Henry Gibson as country superstar Haven Hamilton in Robert Altman's *Nashville*.
**Right:** The film's depiction of politics as an absurd circus grows ever more prescient.

was far too obvious. Or perhaps, in the pre-Reagan era, too far-fetched.

"The great artists are the ones who see who we are becoming, more so than those who see who we are," said Keith Carradine in *Robert Altman: The Oral Biography* by Michael Zuckoff. "He tapped into the American psyche so absolutely directly, and it ain't pretty." Nor has it got any prettier. Of all the plaudits heaped at the feet of *Nashville*, the most resonant are those that draw attention to its prescience. And now, with the mutation of American politics into showbiz complete — look no further than the alarming popularity of Donald Trump's farce of a Presidential campaign or the level of discourse set by Bill O'Reilly, Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck, the Teletubbies of news media — its dark humour seems blacker than ever. On which faintly depressing note, you'll forgive me while I go get my groove on to *The Chrysler Building*. **SIMON BRAUND**



# One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest

## Milos Forman's brains trust are as mad as hell

**1975** / CERT **18** / DIRECTOR **MILOS FORMAN** / SCREENWRITERS **LAWRENCE HAUBEN, BO GOLDMAN** / CAST **JACK NICHOLSON, LOUISE FLETCHER, CHRISTOPHER LLOYD, DANNY DEVITO**

THERE'S A TABLE laden with cheeses, chocolates and cold meats, gathered to provide a resplendent repast for the winners of a raffle. These are pricey provisions, the very best the small Czechoslovakian town can muster to celebrate the occasion: a beauty pageant marking the annual Firemen's Ball. It is the 1960s, and the country is still clutched in the iron grip of communism. Few can afford such lavish refection; hence two of the town's more respectable members are assigned to protect the bounty. Still, human need overcomes the need to be humanly decent, and the spread slowly dissipates — the raffle and the ball be damned. The respectable couple pinch their share, too...

The film (there is a clue in there somewhere) is *The Firemen's Ball*, the 1967 movie that fanned the flames of recognition for director Milos Forman. As in many movies made under the shadow of communism, Forman fabricates a simple human story while poking a desultory digit at the Soviet regime. "He who does not steal steals from his family," he once said with the flagrant honesty that invests the movie, and this scene in particular, with its wry humour. *The Firemen's Ball* was designed to affect change, an aim that Forman thought would be best achieved through this mandate: that honesty and humour should act as tonics to the institutional directives that governed people's lives.

The mandate provided an unshakeable foundation for Forman's first international success, Michael Douglas and Saul Zaentz's problem-plagued production of Ken Kesey's novel, *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*. Forman's journey to Hollywood and the film's torturous trip to the screen are well charted, and once the movie had scooped all five major Oscars, few doubted the filmmaker's glittering credentials. Here was a man who could paint his vision with consummate ease, the honesty and humour so finely honed during the repression of his country bubbling forth through Jack Nicholson's RP McMurphy and his fellow inmates, fizzing and crackling into the minds of the audience like cinematic electro-shock therapy.

The most obvious example of the film's humour comes with arguably its most popular scene, the fishing trip — the inmates' metaphorical two-fingered salute to Nurse Ratched (Louise Fletcher) and her hospital. As McMurphy introduces the patients to a sceptical shareman, each patient reacts with the haughty expression of an academic boffin. As one critic noted: "This has nothing to do with mental illness, but everything to do with comedy."

For some, Kesey included, the scene didn't ring true, but it is key to Forman's movie. While he rejects an accurate portrayal of the inmates' afflictions, he remains totally true to his film. The horror of McMurphy's situation needs to be relieved by moments drenched in levity, and the patients must allow the two main protagonists, Nicholson's capricious Murphy and Fletcher's Nurse Ratched, the space to conduct their duel. The only genuine insights into the causes of the patients' distress come with Chief Bromden's (Will Sampson) whispered words to McMurphy late at

**"HERE WAS A MAN WHO COULD PAINT HIS VISION WITH CONSUMMATE EASE, THE HONESTY AND HUMOUR FINELY HONED."**



## ESSENTIAL FORMAN

**RAGTIME (1981)**
Sprawling but ambitious adaptation of EL Doctorow's novel of early 20th-century New York, with James Cagney.

**AMADEUS (1984)**
Another tale of the archetypal outsider, this time the great composer Mozart, played in inimitable fashion by Tom Hulce.

**VALMONT (1989)**
Drawn from the same steamy novel as *Dangerous Liaisons*. Colin Firth and Annette Bening star.

**THE PEOPLE VS. LARRY FLYNT (1996)**
Woody Harrelson's finest hour, playing porn king Larry Flynt in another of Forman's takes on quintessentially American themes.

**MAN ON THE MOON (1999)**
Jim Carrey turns (mostly) serious in a biopic of the career of the eccentric comedian, Andy Kaufman.



Chief Bromden (Will Sampson), RP McMurphy (Jack Nicholson) and Bancini (Josip Elic) play ball.



Charlie (Sydney Lassick), RP and Chief Bromden are subjected to some very tough love.

night and Billy Bibbit's (Brad Dourif) crumbling tirade against Ratched before his tragic end. Indeed, Kesey was so irked by the adaptation of his novel that he filed a lawsuit, but the fact was, he couldn't provide a workable screenplay when asked — he'd performed one miracle in writing the book, he could not conjure another.

Hence it was screenwriters Bo Goldman and Lawrence Hauben who finally brought Forman's vision alive. The script was quick and punchy, flinging suspected malingerer McMurphy straight onto the ward and channelling the humour and horror into a string of memorable scenes. This story could not enjoy the luxuries of the novel — a movie couldn't recount the tale through the hallucinogenic visions of the Chief — and, to complicate matters, the production was working a decade after the book's publication. Kesey's tome, railing against a hard-nosed administration, had caught the zeitgeist of the early '60s; by the film's release in 1975, people had different concerns. Consequently, in a bid to keep his theme fresh, Forman recalled his homeland and flicked through the tenets of communism, until, in the calm face of Nurse Ratched, he found its apotheosis. Here was the devil with an angel's face, the force working vehemently for a misguided cause, imparting suffering in the name of salvation. And here was Forman's greatest triumph.

Nurse Ratched had, for Kesey, grown as an embodiment of "the Combine", a giant creature often described by a hallucinating Chief as an inhuman, electrical machine, all skittering wires and cracking circuits, her limbs and body frequently ballooning into monstrous proportions as she dispatches the orders of an ugly administration. True, he hints that the motivation behind the Combine's actions worked for the patients' benefit, yet the plainly drawn evil always lurks beneath the surface. In the face of Forman and Fletcher's Ratched, however, a genuine desire to do good shines forth, a misguided light paradoxically wrapping those she hopes to help in bewildering darkness. When Dr Spivey suggests that McMurphy be released from the hospital's care, her response — "I believe we can help him, I really do" — is laced with spine-chilling horror. She really does believe in her fallacious theories, and the only time she surrenders to spite is with Billy, after McMurphy's party has pushed her to breaking point. This scene, with Billy's death and McMurphy's retaliation, provides the dramatic crescendo, although the real horror is reserved for Ratched's response — not the manner of its execution, although that's grisly enough, but the final, dreaded confirmation of McMurphy's failure. This tragedy, the impotence of the sprite flailing against the overpowering conventions of his society, would inform much of Forman's later work from *Amadeus* to *Man On The Moon*, a direct reflection of the director's own experience as the liberalisation of his country, the Prague Spring, crumpled under the heavy tracks of Soviet tanks.

The Chief's final decision is a victory of sorts, but it comes at a high price. That was the reality of Forman's experience, and given McMurphy's prone, neutered position, resigned to the empty environs of an oppressive world, Bromden had to steal the life of his friend, his brother. After all, he who does not steal steals from his family. And Forman knew that all too well. **WILL LAWRENCE**

# All The President's Men

## It's Washington Post-Nixon in Alan Pakula's conspiracy classic

**1976** / CERT **15** / DIRECTOR **ALAN J PAKULA** / SCREENWRITER **WILLIAM GOLDMAN** / CAST **DUSTIN HOFFMAN, ROBERT REDFORD, JACK WARDEN, JASON ROBARDS**

THANKS TO A brilliant script, credited to William Goldman, *All The President's Men* — the story of *Washington Post* journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's investigation into the Watergate scandal — is not just a great film, it's a miraculous one.

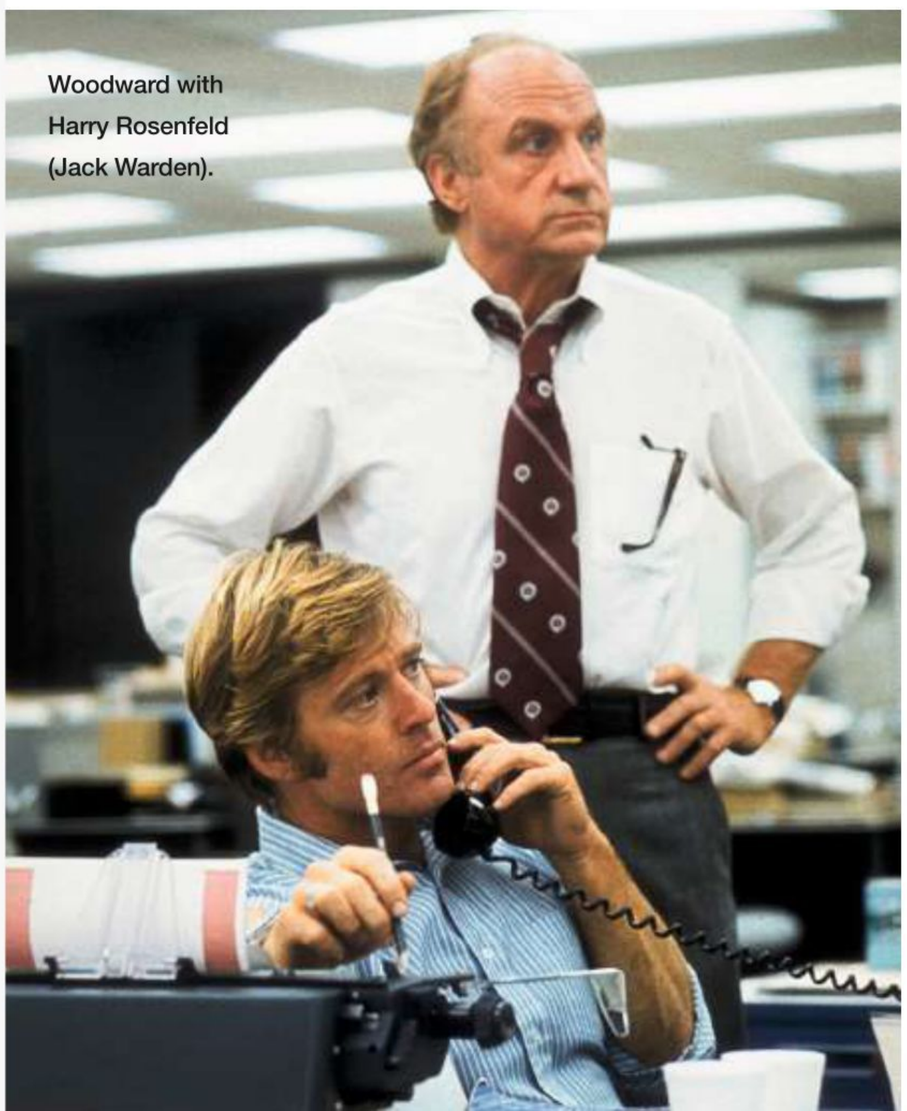
The book of the same name on which it's based, written by Woodward and Bernstein, is a riveting read, but it's a tough one. An exhaustive account of the duo's efforts to expose the Nixon administration's campaign of sabotage against its Democratic opponents in the lead-up to the 1972 election, it's dense with meticulously detailed information as it traces the labyrinthine twists and turns of the case, the attempted cover-up and the subsequent revelations that forced Richard Nixon to resign the Presidency of the United States. Great story though it is, it does not lend itself easily to adaptation. That the film plays as not just a worthy political drama, then, but as a gripping detective story and superbly played character piece too is, indeed, a miracle. It was not one, however, that was easily born.

Robert Redford (who plays Woodward) bought the rights to the book in 1974, and it's a tribute to his tenacity and faith in the project that the film got made at all. With Walter Coblenz producing and a tentative budget set at $5 million (the eventual cost was $8.5 million), Redford's choice of director was Alan J Pakula (well-qualified after 1974's excellent political thriller *The Parallax View*). Goldman, still hot after *Butch And Sundance*, must have seemed like a shoo-in. His initial draft, however, was overlong and unfeasibly complex, and a serious disappointment. Redford and Pakula rejected it outright. Redford sought advice from Woodward and Bernstein, who were similarly underwhelmed. Bernstein then wrote his own version with Nora Ephron which Redford also rejected, referring to it in a 1975 interview as "sophomoric and way off the beat". He and Pakula then held marathon rewrite sessions to knock the script into shape, interviewing a slew of editors and journalists in the process.

The major difference between the film and the book, and the reason it works so well, is that the film focuses only on the first seven months of the affair, starting with the break-in at The Watergate Hotel in Washington, DC, headquarters of the Democratic National Committee, and the shocking disclosure that the burglars were in the pay of the Nixon administration. It then follows Woodward and Bernstein's attempt to break the story and the series of investigative pieces they wrote for *The Washington Post* that gradually unravelled a conspiracy that extended as far as the Oval Office itself. The film ends with Nixon's inauguration in January 1973; a succession of teletyped headlines spells out the following train of events, which concluded with his resignation on 8 August 1974.

Dustin Hoffman was cast as Bernstein and, between them, he and Redford deliver one of the great double-headers in modern cinema, subsuming their superstardom to the cause of two ordinary men, relatively inexperienced, certainly fallible and too driven to be quite likeable, who laid bare the most momentous political scandal of the 20th century not for fortune and glory, but because it was their job.

Both Hoffman and Redford spent months haunting *The Washington Post*'s offices, attending news conferences, observing reporters at work and absorbing the day-to-day running of the paper. Even so, in spite of their dedication, the project was given only guarded support by *Post* Executive Editor Ben Bradlee (played by Jason Robards), and permission to film in the paper's newsroom was denied, although that probably had more to do with the disruption it would have caused than any misgivings about the film. Still, the decision sent the design department into overdrive, meticulously recreating the *Post* newsroom and other locations on soundstages at Los Angeles' Burbank Studios. Piles of authentic office debris were brought in, out-of-date phone books were mocked up, even though they would



Woodward with Harry Rosenfeld (Jack Warden).



# "THANKS TO A BRILLIANT SCRIPT, THIS IS NOT JUST A GREAT FILM — IT'S A MIRACULOUS ONE."

Bob Woodward (Robert Redford) and Carl Bernstein (Dustin Hoffman).

be barely seen, and 200 desks were purchased from the same company that had sold them to the *Post* in 1971, at a cost of $500 each. They were then painted the exact same shade of green as the desks in the *Post* newsroom. The paper even supplied the production with a sample of brick from the building's main lobby so it could be duplicated exactly on set.

The extra effort paid off. The film has an unerringly authentic look, one that seems particularly rooted in '70s cinema, and it extends far beyond the set-dressing. No movie before or since has captured so compellingly the coalface workings of the American press, its place in society or what motivates news journalists to do what they do. And, given how drastically each of those factors has shifted in the intervening years, it's doubtful that one ever will. Aside from the admiration for Woodward and Bernstein the film engenders, it also, inevitably, arouses a sense of nostalgia — longing, even — for an era when newspapers mattered and when reporters considered it their duty to bring corruption in government to public attention and to hold those responsible to account. Having experienced an administration whose wrongdoings made Watergate look like a parking ticket, and a press corps that was cravenly complicit in those wrongdoings, the title of this film alone takes on a whole new resonance. **SIMON BRAUND**

# Network

## Television will eat itself in Sidney Lumet's searing satire

**1976** / CERT **15** / DIRECTOR **SIDNEY LUMET** / SCREENWRITER **PADDY CHAYEFSKY** / CAST **FAYE DUNAWAY, WILLIAM HOLDEN, PETER FINCH**



WHEN, SOMETIME IN the mid-1950s, the by-then confidently toddling cinema received the joyous news it had a new baby brother in the shape of the television sets that were flickering to life in the living rooms of America, it acted in the way that many a sibling does when Mum brings the newly gurgling baby back from the hospital: it plotted how to kill it.

After all, if the attentions of the masses were to be seduced away by this cathode-ray cuckoo in the nest, the studios' number might be up. Who would be interested in dragging themselves out to the movies? The first response was to deny the new broadcasting corporations rights to show any of their films at all — thus accidentally forcing the networks to invent the smorgasbord of TV formats that are still with us today: game shows, soap operas and sitcoms are all formats invented in the face of Hollywood's intransigence. The second sally was a flurry of innovations to distinguish the small from the big screen (CinemaScope, 3D, to an extent colour). But big brother celluloid puts the boot into tiny tot telly whenever Mum isn't watching. To take a few random examples, television has in the past few decades been portrayed in Hollywood movies as: a portal to a world of unimaginable evil (*Poltergeist*); the vehicle for a government hoax (*Capricorn One*); a stultifying realm of repression (*Pleasantville*). Even *Good Night, And Good Luck*, which nominally championed television journalist Edward R Murrow, ends with his having to capitulate to the mendacious bosses.

Sidney Lumet and Paddy Chayefsky's film, then, is about the power of the media and paranoia and exploitation, a perfect example of the committed, angry New American Cinema of the '70s, but it also sits in a long tradition of Hollywood's hostility to its electronic sibling. *Network* is the perfect meeting of director and screenplay, and both knew of what they spoke. Sidney Lumet had first been an actor but had become a successful TV director, regularly helming episodes of crime drama *Danger*. Screenwriter Paddy Chayefsky had also ploughed his furrow in what, partly because of Hollywood's hostility to it, became known as the Golden Age of TV, but by the '70s both were disturbed by its power, recklessness and cynicism. (Lumet's previous film, *Dog Day Afternoon*, foregrounded what would become known in the electronic media as a catalyst for chaos; when Al Pacino's bank robber Sonny yells, "Attica! Attica!" it is the newfangled handheld cameras of a live news network he's addressing.) And Chayefsky's enraged howl of a screenplay may have had its genesis in the real-life suicide of a Cleveland news reporter who, on the morning of 15 July 1974, after a report about a restaurant robbery, announced to her viewers that, "In keeping with Channel 40's policy of bringing you the latest in blood and guts, and in living colour, you are going to see another first: an attempted suicide," before pulling a .38 revolver from a bag of puppets she used to entertain disabled children and blowing her head off. Live. On TV. Needless to say, it caused a sensation. Needless to say, viewing figures for the station spiked shortly thereafter.

It's Peter Finch's portrayal of Howard Beale, the emotionally imploded newscaster who first threatens a very public suicide but then, in one of cinema's great rants, connects with

**"A TELEVISUAL TRAVIS BICKLE, BEALE'S WILD, HOLLOW-EYED, MESSIANIC MADNESS IS PAINFUL AND FRIGHTENING TO WATCH."**




Howard (Peter Finch) and Max (William Holden) are deadly serious. **Below:** So is Diana (Faye Dunaway).



his fearful, disconnected audience by bellowing, "I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take this anymore!" that gets the immediate attention, of course. He's a televisual Travis Bickle, and his descent into wild, hollow-eyed, messianic madness — exploited by all around him, but somehow expressing the feelings of those who bellow out of their windows into the night along with him — is still painful and frightening to watch. He's the modern-day carnival geek, and the neon-clad, garishly overlit sets provided for him by the network on which to rage are his pit.

Faye Dunaway excels as hard-as-nails network exec Diana Christensen. This is a woman for whom the visceral pleasures of screwing and stoking the ratings are pretty much one and the same — at one climax she gasps enthusiastically about the overnights — and there may well be a very 1970s expression of the American company man's anxiety about women moving out of the bedroom and into the boardroom in her dramatic construction. Ned Beatty has a fine time as the CEO who invites views on whether the network should murder its star. But the real dramatic motor is veteran William Holden's turn as Max Schumacher, who is trapped between loyalties to his friend Howard and the all-pervasive network, as well as undergoing his own less explosive crisis as he embarks on a dangerous affair with Diana. And, by the way, that is lefty firebrand Tim Robbins in a very early role as a Commie terrorist.

No director directs in confined spaces as well as Lumet, and the studios, offices and galleries of a giant telly empire are beautifully realised. But Lumet and Chayefsky's real achievement is the subtle escalation of the drama — as critic Roger Ebert puts it, you find yourself having entered the madhouse without realising it.

One of Network's most mischievous ideas is that the network, emboldened by Beale's nightly rants, will further extend this blurring of the real and the managed by pitching a show about contemporary terrorists in which the terrorists would play themselves. The urban guerillas in question are clearly modelled on the Symbionese Liberation Army, which had provoked its own TV tsunami by kidnapping Patty Hearst in 1974 and are later seen negotiating syndication rights with an enthusiastic Christensen. At the time, the idea was the height of absurdity. Today we're probably not far from it. The ghastly thought, then, is this: did Sidney Lumet and Paddy Chayefsky accidentally invent reality TV? **ADAM SMITH**

# Rocky

## Still a knockout



**1976** / CERT **12** / DIRECTOR **JOHN G AVILDSEN** / SCREENWRITER **SYLVESTER STALLONE** / CAST **SYLVESTER STALLONE, TALIA SHIRE, BURT YOUNG, CARL WEATHERS**

IN THE SPRING of 1975, Sylvester Stallone was at best a marginal Hollywood presence with a softcore porn movie and a few bit parts behind him (including *Bananas*' 'Subway Thug #1', which involved him beating up Woody Allen). He was also a man with a mere $106 in his bank account. Still, one morning he looked at a cheque for $265,000 made out in his name, pondered briefly the difference that such a sum would make to his and his wife's lives, and threw it in the bin.

The other name on the cheque was that of big-hitter studio United Artists, then home of James Bond. What Stallone was refusing to sell them was a screenplay. He had famously written *Rocky* in three-and-a-half days, fired with enthusiasm, after watching the historic Muhammad Ali/Chuck Wepner fight in which Wepner, a boxer widely expected to exit the ring on a stretcher within seconds, in fact went a full 15 gruelling rounds. "That night I went home and I had the beginning of my character," Stallone wrote shortly after the film's release. "I had him now... a man from the streets... the all-American tragedy, a man who didn't have much mentality but had incredible emotion and patriotism and spirituality and good nature, even though life had not been good to him. He was America's child. He was to the '70s what Chaplin's Little Tramp was to the '20s."

At heart, Stallone's story is not particularly audacious. It follows a small-time goon who, after falling in love with a shy girl whose brother is over-protective, is bribed to throw a fight. But what he could see, and what had been missed by the various producers who had read the screenplay, was that *Rocky* was that rarest of things: a bona fide starmaker. And he fully intended to be the star that it made. United Artists had originally been determined to go with a mid-level draw in the title role (James Caan and Ryan O'Neal were among the names floated) to bolster the marginal bankability of the whole project, which, they predicted, might make a couple of million before slinking off to TV. Stallone's truculence paid off. Legendary producers Irwin Winkler and Robert Chartoff, who had free reign at UA to greenlight low-budget projects, finally caved and gave him the starring role, provided he work for scale and that the movie come in at a ridiculously small $1.1 million. They were also sharp enough to insist on a director with form: John G Avildsen, a quality journeyman with a reputation for efficiency (and who would go on to repackage *Rocky* for the teen market as *The Karate Kid* in 1984).

The film that emerged, to enthusiastic reviews and stunning box office, is a unique bridge between the kind of movies Hollywood, freed from the shackles of the studio system, had been making for the past decade and the ones it was about to be straitjacketed into. Surprisingly, fisticuffs take up a scant ten minutes of its running time. What *Rocky* is full of is human, rather than pugilistic, conflict. Avildsen channels a pop-Cassavetes sensibility, casting established character actors around the new star. Burt Young, tiny eyes bulging out of a Toby jug face, is a ball of conflicted energy. Burgess Meredith is a hair's-breadth away from cliché as the gruff but finally supportive coach, while Talia Shire is agonising as the girl who looks frightened even of the budgies in her down-at-heel pet shop.

Avildsen allows all these great characters room and time to establish

themselves, and shoots the grimy meatpacking district of Philadelphia with a sharp eye for moody detail. Then, switching gears after the iconic training montage, he shifts the film to triumphal territory, but with a masterstroke of a kicker. In Stallone's original version, Balboa had finally thrown the fight. Instead, Avildsen had him punch on, and then obscured the actual result in a swiftly chopped finale. Stallone wanted it to be crystal clear that Rocky had lost, but Avildsen realised that this, if mishandled, would be a downer for a film whose structure had been on the dramatic ascent. In the end he had his way: audiences, leaving on an emotional high, only realised later that Balboa had lost, yet still felt good about the outcome. It's a daring structural gambit, and would likely get smothered in the crib today.

Will he or won't he? Stallone's Rocky Balboa squares up to Carl Weathers' Apollo Creed.

*Rocky* would go on to make $225 million and spawn six sequels, including last year's *Creed*, which secured Stallone another acting Oscar nomination. 1979's *Rocky II*, despite straining to re-establish Balboa's underdog credibility, has some of the rough-hewn charm of its progenitor. But by *Rocky III*, perhaps unnerved by the arrival of a certain Austrian, Stallone had embarked on a ghastly transformation. The blue-collar authenticity evaporated, replaced by oiled lats and oilier off-the-peg patriotism. He slowly became a work of living kitsch: a walking, talking Jeff Koons artwork.

Legendary libertine and movie producer Don Simpson once said that the perfect movie should end on a freeze-frame. He probably wasn't thinking of Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* when he made the remark, but of *Rocky*. Despite — *Creed* aside — the descent of Stallone's career into self-parody, finding its autumnal expression in the tiresome *Expendables* franchise, those final few moments, as Bill Conti's masterly score thunders to its pitch-perfect climax, are as good as Hollywood has ever been or will ever get. Laydeez 'n' gennelmen... Rocky Balboa! **ADAM SMITH**

# Eraserhead

## Gone mutant baby gone

**1977** / CERT **18** /
DIRECTOR
**DAVID LYNCH** /
SCREENWRITER
**DAVID LYNCH** /
CAST **JACK NANCE, CHARLOTTE STEWART, LAUREL NEAR**

OF ALL THE unforgettable images and sounds pulsing in the surreal mist of *Eraserhead* — and there are enough to keep a psychiatrist in session for several lifetimes — one will forever haunt the nightmares of anyone who sees it. The creature is mutant, phallic, almost amphibian; coated in a film of sickly mucus and sores. Its side-set black eyes roll deliriously as it gargles and wheezes that newborn cry: a blood-curdling, squelchy wail at once helpless and hideously manipulative. Congratulations, Mr Spencer, it's a... thing! Delivered mysteriously to dazed, shock-haired drone Henry and his catatonic girlfriend, this repellent bundle-of-joy will eventually drive daddy to madness and a gruesome, scissor-wielding infanticide. Forget birth control; doctors should prescribe a screening of *Eraserhead* to thwart breeding.

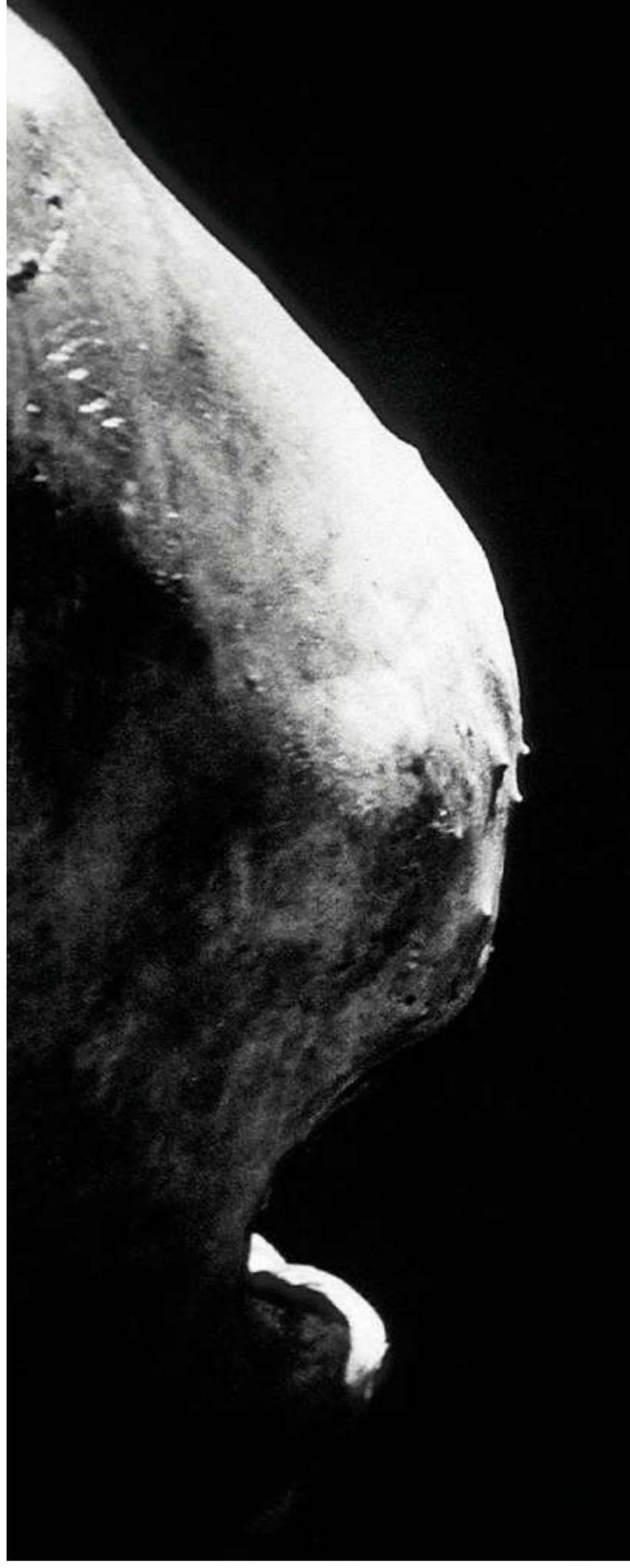
David Lynch notoriously refuses to talk about the "baby" — he's said to have blindfolded the projectionist during rushes to keep it secret — fuelling endless speculation as to how the director created such an uncannily organic spawn. Was it indeed the embalmed cow foetus of urban myth? A stillborn puppet? A genuine extraterrestrial trapped in elaborate art snuff? Whatever the case, Lynch isn't saying; it's likely that he never will.

What Lynch would say was that *Eraserhead* was his "*Philadelphia Story*"; the film's ghostly, oppressive industrial landscape coursing with his experience of living in the city ("It was a very sick, twisted, violent, fear-ridden, decadent, decaying place," he said at the time). Conventional theory maintains that it's a metaphor for the anxieties of fatherhood, and it's true there's a sense of the personal here — Lynch became a parent for the first time before he started the film; during the shoot, he and his first wife were divorced. Yet in spite of the malignant brew — the horror of reproduction, the suffocation of family and urban decay — Lynch attributes the movie's texture to his greatest career muse, the subconscious. "I had a very happy childhood," he reflected in 1978, probably to the astonishment of some. "These things in *Eraserhead* come from somewhere unseen." In his more recent manifesto *Catching The Big Fish*, Lynch even calls *Eraserhead* his most "spiritual" movie.

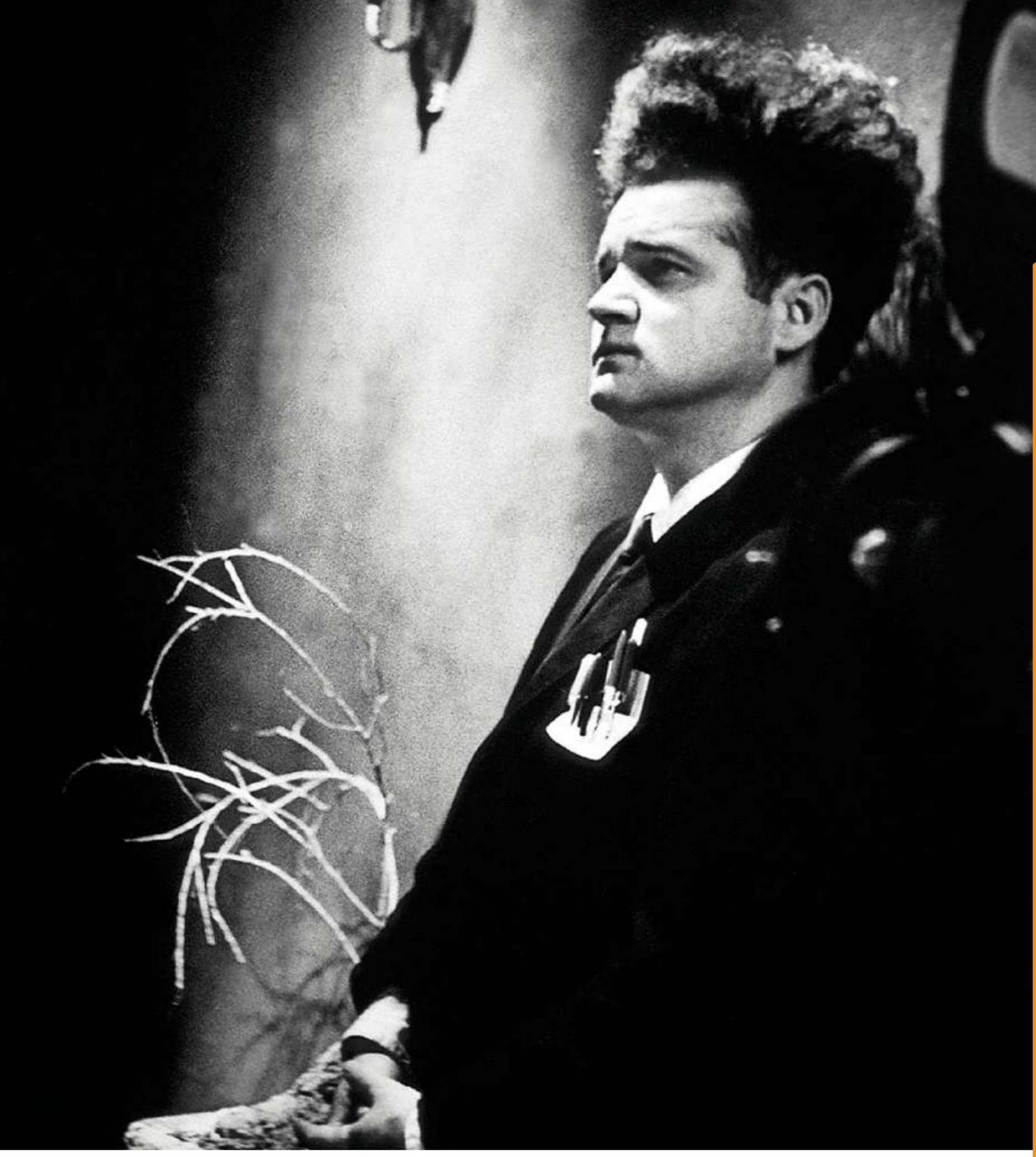
It was certainly his most arduous. Begun in 1971 with the endorsement of the American Film Institute, *Eraserhead* would take Lynch over five years to complete. Having exhausted the AFI's initial grant (and the patience of some perplexed backers), the production moved fitfully according to available resources. Lynch ran out of money, and at one point considered building an eight-inch figure of Henry to animate stop-motion in a miniature cardboard set. "I thought I was dead," he later said, wondering whether the world wasn't passing him by. After his brother told him to find a proper job and forget filmmaking, Lynch took a paper route, delivering *The Wall Street Journal* for $50 a week, saving up just enough money to shoot scene by scene until he had finished (on close inspection you can actually see Jack Nance age over scenes, such was the delay).

The completed film was rejected by both Cannes and the New York Film Festival, but independent distributor Ben Barenholtz helped push it onto the American midnight movie circuit, where it took on a life of its own. Reactions ran the gamut from mixed to completely bewildered. *Variety* were vocally unimpressed. "*Eraserhead* is a sickening bad-taste exercise made by David Lynch," grumbled their review, describing the film's grisly climax as "unwatchable". At the typically insightful *Village Voice*, however, J Hoberman wryly remarked: "*Eraserhead* is not a movie I'd drop acid for, although I would consider it a revolutionary act if someone dropped a reel of it into the middle of *Star Wars*." Did George Lucas have a sense of humour? After seeing the film he offered Lynch the director's chair on *Return Of The Jedi*. Lynch, perhaps not the best man to work with Ewoks, wisely declined.

It had other notable fans, too. Francis Ford Coppola was said to have shown *Eraserhead* to his cast on the set of *Apocalypse Now*; Mel Brooks, who famously dubbed Lynch "Jimmy Stewart from Mars", hired him to direct *The Elephant Man*; and Stanley Kubrick, while shooting *The Shining*, would invite his crew up to the house to see what he was calling his "favourite film". ("Right then I could've passed



**"I HAD A VERY HAPPY CHILDHOOD. THESE THINGS IN *ERASERHEAD* COME FROM SOMEWHERE UNSEEN."**



Hair-raising times ahead for Henry Spencer (Jack Nance).

away peaceful and happy," a thrilled Lynch later said when told about it.)

*Eraserhead* became a minor phenomenon unto itself. For many of us it was passed on as the cult movie rite-of-passage; maybe the messenger was a worn-out VHS, a faded poster on the AV room wall, or the Pixies screeching their version of the film's beguiling theme, *Lady In The Radiator*. It was art film and cult film, inscrutable and immediate. You didn't watch *Eraserhead*; you experienced it as you would a dream, full of fear, confusion and wonder. "The whole film is undercurrents of a sort of subconscious," Lynch once said. "It kind of wiggles around in there, and it's how it strikes each person. It definitely means something to me, but I don't want to talk about that. It means other things to other people, and that's great."

The logic of the subconscious. That's the genius of Lynch's film, and a quality that extends across almost all of his subsequent work. Though *Eraserhead* shares elements with the surrealist cinema of Buñuel and Cocteau (not to mention the grotesquerie of horror and sci-fi), there are few films quite like it when it comes to capturing the dream-state on screen. As much installation art as movie, *Eraserhead* is alive — it demands the viewer surrender to its embrace, luring us into the freak theatre with the promise of paradise on the other side of the radiator. There's a strangely soothing quality to its ambience of white noise, industrial clang and heaving pistons which cushions the stark grey-on-grey cinematography and swirling sense of psychic menace.

In *Eraserhead*'s final moments, Henry, seemingly liberated from his anxieties, transcends to what we might read as a life of bliss with his platinum-haired siren. But the fabric of the film is that of a dream; we can never be sure. Who is the disembodied blonde whose face is about to explode, and why is she living inside our hero's heater? Will everything really be fine in heaven, as she claims? Like the best kind of dreams, *Eraserhead* is both horrifying and intensely beautiful. **LUKE GOODSELL**

## ESSENTIAL LYNCH

### THE ELEPHANT MAN (1980)
His rare successful venture into the mainstream, Lynch's austere, black-and-white period piece tells the tragic tale of the deformed John Merrick.

### BLUE VELVET (1986)
Respirators, severed ears, the mysteries of love: a psychic dive into the ghoulish underbelly of idyllic suburbia and the film that would most come to define Lynch's world in the era of *Twin Peaks*.

### WILD AT HEART (1990)
Lynch's *Wizard Of Oz* — seriously. A violent, surreal road movie in which Nicolas Cage and Laura Dern go on the run from a menagerie of freaks hired to kill them.

### LOST HIGHWAY (1997)
Lynch's obsession with splintered personality takes shape in this nightmare account of a man accused of murdering his wife who switches identities with a young prisoner.

### MULHOLLAND DR. (2001)
Fascinating, perplexing thriller revolving around the shattered dreams of a Hollywood star and an aspiring actress who may-or may not be one and the same.

### INLAND EMPIRE (2006)
Much maligned on its original release, *Inland Empire*, for better or worse, marked Lynch's total immersion into digital, erm, film. Disturbing, illogical and a tough watch, things lighten up when we meet a family of stop-motion rabbits.

# Suspiria

**Incoherent, insane and overacted — all hail Dario Argento's witches' brew...**



**1977** / CERT **18** / DIRECTOR **DARIO ARGENTO** / SCREENWRITERS **DARIO ARGENTO, DARIA NICOLODI** / CAST **JESSICA HARPER, STEFANIA CASINI, UDO KIER**

*SUSPIRIA*, WITH A bland, banal conventionality that will soon seem like the fragments of a long-forgotten dream, begins with a voiceover. "Suzy Bannion decided to perfect her ballet studies in the most famous school of dance in Europe," announces our narrator. "She chose the celebrated academy of Freeborge. One day, at nine in the morning, she left Kennedy Airport, New York, and arrived in Germany at 10.40pm local time..."

It is the last time we'll ever hear him. And wherever he went, he took the only shreds of lucidity, reason or coherence with him. And, frankly, good riddance.

In the early 1970s, Dario Argento, who had ploughed his furrow in the *giallo* field (overwrought, bloody thrillers that took their name from the yellow covers of the pulp novels that inspired them), had been readying a project based on the works of HP Lovecraft. When that fell to pieces, he was still keen on something supernatural. "I don't believe in the devil," he said later. "In the movies he always made me laugh. But witches fascinated me."

One such witch fascinated Argento enough for him to shack up with her — actress, writer and white witch Daria Nicolodi. Nicolodi gained her interest in matters *magia bianca* from her mother, and she from her grandmother, the latter of whom told a story of attending a music school that turned out to be a front for the study of black magic. The story resonated with Argento, and he and Nicolodi worked on a screenplay.

The title is from Thomas De Quincey's *Suspiria de Profundis* (*Sighs From The Depths*), a drug-inspired prose-poem from the infamous author of *Confessions Of An English Opium Addict*. But the film's most powerful influence is more contemporary and unexpected. "*Suspiria* is heavily influenced by *Snow White And The Seven Dwarfs*," said Argento. "In an early draft, I even planned to have the action take place in a child's school where the witches and teachers tortured the children." Though objections from the financiers KO'd the idea of exposing actual kiddiewinks to Argento's attentions, he did continue to stress the fairy-tale nature of his film by distorting the proportions of the set to infantilise the characters (note how the door handles are fitted at head height).

*Suspiria* is, above anything else, a sustained jag of sensory overload: thunder and lightning rent the air, casting hideous shadows of sickles against deathly white birch tree trunks; terrified women are glimpsed tearing through the rain shrieking for their lives; Goblin's astonishing score hisses, caterwauls and occasionally belches out an electronically distorted howl of, "WITCH!" And that's just the trip from the airport.

People often dub Argento 'The Italian Hitchcock', but this opening sequence shows just how reductive the comparison is. Certainly, the two share a penchant for putting their leading women through the grinder, and both have a thing for bravura sequences. But Hitch lived in the land of the logical; even his dream sequences made some kind of sense. What Argento understands is that dreams and nightmares not only defy logic — for the most part, they defy description. They are feelings made into images rather than stories, and Argento uses every trick at his disposal to wrench the viewer from the logical to the surreal. The film's astonishing colour scheme, achieved by using redundant Technicolor stock and printing the film on the only remaining three-strip machine in Europe, drenches the insanely baroque sets with vivid primary hues. "In *Suspiria* we were trying to reproduce the colour of Walt Disney's *Snow White*," reiterates Argento of the film's witchy forebear. "It has been said from the beginning that Technicolor lacked subdued shades, was without nuances, like cut-out cartoons."

If anything is less restrained than the decor, it's the acting. Argento concocts an insanely rich Euro-pudding featuring a shockingly reserved Udo Kier; a stately Joan Bennett, who delivers a performance half Lady Bracknell and half Alastair Sim, headmistress of a diabolical St Trinian's; and former Italian beauty Alida Valli, whose teutonic Miss Tanner has more than a whiff of Vera 'Vinegar Tits' Bennett from *Prisoner:* about her. American star Jessica Harper (fresh from Brian De Palma's garish rock opera *Phantom Of The Paradise*) looks believably bewildered among a cast who are acting in three different languages and, quite possibly in their own minds, entirely different films. (Finding the hideously aged Helena Markos, apex of the coven, presented its own challenges. "I wanted somebody incredibly old, the oldest person I had ever seen," Argento recalls. "I wanted to use someone from a lunatic asylum, but the authorities wouldn't let me. But then I found this woman at the post office.")

*Suspiria*'s plot, as even its most devoted admirers will admit, does not bear close examination. Ms Bannion turns out to be an accidental guest of the aforesaid witches who appear to have, for reasons never explained, opened a dancing school, in order, perhaps, to lure new initiates, coven-ready, if you will. Murder, maggots and mayhem ensue. But in the end, the plot's incoherence brilliantly serves Argento's ultimate aim, not of depicting a nightmare, but of trying to recreate the feeling of being in one. "The Only Thing More Terrifying Than The Last 12 Minutes Of This Film Are The First 92!" boasted the fantastically illiterate, innumerate and illogical US poster tagline. The far better, more accurate sell encapsulates *Suspiria*'s nightmarish, night-sweat-inducing weirdness with admirable brevity. "Don't think... panic." **ADAM SMITH**

**"ARGENTO USES EVERY TRICK TO WRENCH THE VIEWER FROM THE LOGICAL TO THE SURREAL."**

# Big Wednesday

## Just swell

**1978** / CERT **PG** / DIRECTOR **JOHN MILIUS** / SCREENWRITERS **JOHN MILIUS, DENNIS AABERG** / CAST **JAN-MICHAEL VINCENT, WILLIAM KATT, GARY BUSEY**

WERE THEY PUTTING something in SoCal's water supply in the early '70s that transformed still wet-behind-the-ears cineastes into absurdly youthful nostalgia freaks? Take George Lucas' paean to the urban idyll, *American Graffiti*. "Where were you in '62?", asked the poster tagline. Given that the film was released in 1973, no-one should have had much difficulty remembering. For John Milius, the black sheep of the New Hollywood, the early-onset wistfulness had its roots in his childhood memories of being a wide-eyed beach rat immersing himself in the just-beginning-to-roar surf culture of Malibu. Having moved with his family from Missouri when he was seven, the golden sands and Coppertoned bodies had been a revelation. And then there were the surfers. The sport was then on the ascendant, emerging from its underground, rebel roots to embrace a complete culture: clothing, music, slang and attitude were coalescing, dude, into a lifestyle that would be envied by youths all over the world. At Surfrider Beach, he and his friend Dennis Aaberg would gaze in awe at the "men", the 19- and 20-year-olds who dominated the beach and the ocean beyond.

Years later Aaberg would pen a short story about the boys' adolescent hi-jinx. *No Pants Mance*, loosely based on fact, was published in *Surfer* magazine in 1974 and charted a chaotic Malibu house party whose various debauches culminated in a urine-filled steam iron. (This scene would become a *Porky's*-esque sequence in the film.) Milius read the story and proposed a movie, convincing Warner to let him and Aaberg co-script, and Milius direct.

With the honourable exception of Bruce Brown's doco *The Endless Summer*, surfing in the movies had been confined to exploitation fare such as *Gidget* and *Muscle Beach Party*, saccharine drive-in confections designed to be ignored by necking teens. Milius' ambition was to lift the genre and sport to new heights, using the idyllic Californian setting (beautifully shot by Bruce) and arresting surf footage as both a backdrop and a metaphor for the changing society around his characters, as well as their, and its, loss of innocence.

Structured around five swells between 1962 and 1974, *Big Wednesday* drifts at a leisurely pace, following the lives and travails of its three young leads. Jack (a strikingly blond William Katt) is a sensible boy-next-door type; masochist (Gary Busey) is the wild guy of the group, prone to starting bar-room brawls, and in one memorable sequence greasing himself up and diving head first into an oven (match that, Johnny Utah); while Matt (Jan-Michael Vincent) is the star, a poet of the waves who nevertheless teeters on the edge of personal catastrophe when he isn't in the water. All the while the boys' mentor, Bear (Sam Melville), waxes his board, firing off suitably gnomic *aperçus* about the profound freedoms of the ocean and a mythic swell, the titular Big Wednesday.

The idyll can't last, though, and slowly time and events take their toll. Alcohol and unplanned fatherhood threaten to ruin Matt, while Jack heads to Vietnam (the induction sequence is both surreally funny and poignant).

*Big Wednesday* was a notorious flop when it was released. Milius' heart-on-his-sleeve romantic machismo fell flat with most critics, who were already suspicious of his politics, and it sat uneasily in a Hollywood that was already being taken over by the ruthlessly honed summer tentpoles that eschewed its lazy pace and balls-out sentimentality in favour of slick spectacle, for the most part set in space. (As Lucas recalled ruefully as recently as 2010, Milius, Spielberg and Lucas had traded percentage points in *Star Wars*, *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind* and *Big Wednesday*, thus making Milius significantly richer and Lucas and Spielberg less so.) What's more, the longboard surfing it featured was out of fashion with the surf community, which just added to the sense that it was a film out of its time. Its rediscovery on video in the 1980s and subsequent adoption by surfers as well as movie buffs rendered it a genuine cult movie, one from which Kathryn Bigelow was savvy enough to ransack liberally for *Point Break*.

As with the film's characters, history would not be particularly kind to either its stars or director. Katt would go on to have a solid but unspectacular career in low-rent horror and slightly more respectable TV. As with his character, booze would get the better of Jan Michael-Vincent, two serious road accidents and a spell in jail in the 2000s signalling the end of his career. Busey, meanwhile, occasionally visits Earth.

John Milius would remain outside the Hollywood establishment, his politics (a Zen anarchist, he is a self-proclaimed "right-wing extremist... a Maoist" ) on display in *Red Dawn*, after which he weathered the further flops of *Farewell To The King* and *Flight Of The Intruder*, before resigning himself to the odd TV movie. Seen today, Milius's best film is the aquamarine-tinted nostalgia trip it always was, but it also leaves you gently mourning the days when Hollywood studios could produce films as personal, ambitious and unique as *Big Wednesday*. **ADAM SMITH**



William Katt, Jan-Michael Vincent and Gary Busey like what they see in the surf.

# Alien

## When science-fiction got real

**1979** / CERT **18** /
DIRECTOR
**RIDLEY SCOTT** /
SCREENWRITER
**DAN O'BANNON** /
CAST **SIGOURNEY WEAVER, TOM SKERRITT, JOHN HURT**



IN SPACE, NO-ONE can hear Veronica Cartwright scream. Actually, yes, they can. Fellow cast and crew members, all gathered on the set of spaceship Nostromo, can't help but notice that the actress playing Lambert has become hysterical — and has ended up on the floor.

Even if you haven't seen *Alien*, you know exactly what will follow once John Hurt (playing Kane) begins writhing around on the table. Alas, Cartwright and co were less clued-up about "the chest-bursting scene", a cinematic moment destined to be so iconic as to permeate the collective consciousness.

They had read the script of course, but all that told them was that something would emerge; they didn't know what or where from. This state of less-than-blissful ignorance was a calculated ploy by director Ridley Scott, who wanted genuine reactions, not movie fakery.

He got his wish. As well as Cartwright's panicked response to being hit in the face by a squirt of stage blood, Yaphet Kotto (playing Parker) had to go and sit quietly in his dressing room, while Sigourney Weaver was genuinely concerned for Hurt's wellbeing.

The next reaction to be gauged was that of the paying public; an early screening in Dallas, in the spring of 1979, told Scott everything he needed to know. From the back of the theatre, he watched the scene play out to an audience who went on to furiously applaud (or, in some cases, faint — or run to the toilet to be sick).

Such early, violent and rousing responses prophetically indicated how *Alien* would, upon release, rapidly cast an epochal shadow across the pantheon of screen sci-fi. Thirty-six years on, Scott's meticulous effort endures because it values subtlety over spectacle; the scariest moments are when you see the fear in the crew's eyes, rather than what they might be about to witness.

Hurt's horrific experience is just one of many great moments; arguably, the "chestburster" does *Alien* a disservice by putting them in the shade. There's the opening shot that explores the sleeping ship; Dallas' (Tom Skerritt) claustrophobic crawl through the air shaft; decapitated android Ash (Ian Holm) offering his hollow condolences; the unidentified liquid dripping on Brett (Harry Dean Stanton); and many more.

Set in 2122, *Alien* begins aboard a commercial towing ship, with a crew of seven in hypersleep. Woken by the ship's computer to investigate an unknown signal coming from a nearby planetoid, a search party discovers an abandoned alien craft. Inside, Kane is attacked by a "facehugger", a creature that duly attaches itself to his visage. Back on the Nostromo, Kane is eventually released and all seems well — then comes that moment. With the eponymous alien loose and deadly, it must be hunted down... before it kills everyone.

The tension of this onerous task is all-consuming, owing much to the Nostromo's environment, designed by concept artist Ron Cobb (who established the look working on 1974 dark sci-fi comedy *Dark Star*, penned by *Alien* scriptwriter Dan O'Bannon and something of a precursor to Scott's refined scarer). The pristine interiors of Stanley Kubrick's Discovery One are replaced by industrial metal, suspicious shadows and dim corridors.

Characterisations also play their part in quickening the pulse. With so few people on board, we are drawn in to getting to know everyone intimately, and subsequently feel their pain. Scott

The Alien — aka Nigerian actor Bolaji Badejo in a suit — leaves the Nostromo.

provided each actor with reams of back story for their characters, which results in a superbly naturalistic feel to their conversations. That we see them discussing their crap food and arguing over bonuses like they are in any office canteen makes it more terrifying when the acidic blood hits the fan. These are normal peeps, not space marines.

You might not think that of Ripley, as the legend of Weaver's heroine suggests that she was an ass-kicking über-warrior from day one. But it wasn't until James Cameron got hold of her in 1986 sequel *Aliens* that the gun-toting aggro kicked in.

That's not to say she isn't determined, but she is also wide-eyed, and much more feminine than in her later incarnations (witness the cold clone version in *Alien Resurrection*). She has to rally against her masculine environment, goes out of her way to save the ship's cat from doom and, in an intense moment of vulnerability, strips to her underwear having escaped the Nostromo on a shuttle — only to find that she isn't alone...

Ripley's courage under fire may have been sparked by what Weaver was going through in her career: *Alien* was her feature-film debut at the age of 30. Perhaps Scott empathised with her inexperience as, incredibly, *Alien* was only the British commercials director's second feature. Either way, casting Weaver brought about a defining role — a leading lady with attitude.

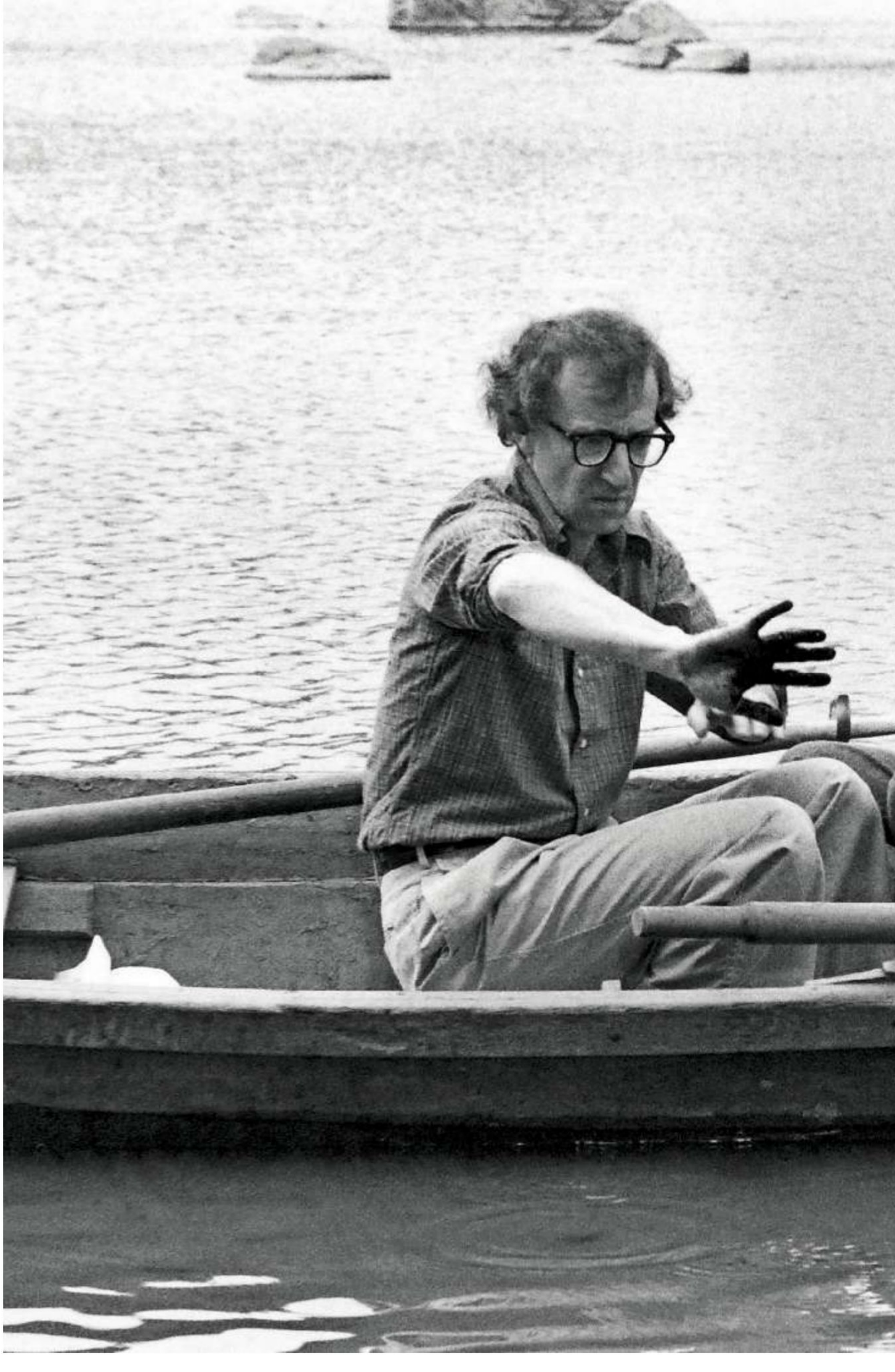
Someone else who excited the director was HR Giger, the Swiss surrealist artist. O'Bannon showed Scott a Giger painting called *Necronom IV*, and they decided he was the man to design the titular terror in all its forms, as well as its ship and environs. Film studio Fox was initially unconvinced, but Scott insisted they acquiesce or he would depart. Fox caved — and the film won an Oscar for Best Visual Effects.

The most important part of *Alien*'s legacy, though? The fact that it's called *Alien*. Why? Because it was very nearly called *Star Beast*. Now that's scary... **DAN POOLE**

# Manhattan

## Woody Allen starts spreadin' the news

**1979** / CERT **15** /
DIRECTOR
**WOODY ALLEN** /
SCREENWRITER
**WOODY ALLEN** /
CAST **WOODY ALLEN, DIANE KEATON, MARIEL HEMINGWAY**



*MANHATTAN* IS OFTEN cited as Woody Allen's Valentine to New York, although any one of his films from this mid-career period could be described as, at least, a note passed in class. Still, this, boasting Gordon Willis' classic black-and-white photography, a lush Gershwin score and an iconic poster (Woody and Diane Keaton, side-by-side on a park bench, overlooking the majestic Queensboro Bridge) is his most ardent love letter to the city that nurtured and inspired him. It even begins with Woody's character, Isaac — a 42-year-old, faintly neurotic TV writer and divorcee — composing, in voiceover, just such a billet-doux. "Chapter One. He adored New York. He idolised it all out of proportion... Er, no. Make that: He... He romanticised it all out of proportion." And he's making a hash of it. After numerous revisions, running the gamut from corny to preachy to angry, he nosedives into cliché, concluding with a perfectly pitched bit of self-parody: "Chapter One. He was as tough and romantic as the city he loved. Behind his black-rimmed glasses was the coiled sexual power of a jungle cat. New York was his town, and it always would be..." The accompaniment to this is fireworks exploding over the East River and the soaring apartment blocks of the Upper East Side while Gershwin's *Rhapsody In Blue* sets the mood. It's as romantic an image of New York as you could wish for, the point being that Woody knows full well mere words are seldom the equal of true love, and that he's happy to let the film do the talking. And talk it does, with eloquence, wistful reflection and some of the funniest lines ever to come click-clacking out of Woody's trusty Smith Corona (you can't write a movie like *Manhattan* on a Selectric; it just wouldn't be right). *Manhattan* is the apotheosis, for instance, of his bent for weaving high-brow literary and artistic figures into zingy one-liners — Isaac (discussing someone's analyst): "He's done a great job on you, you know? Your self-esteem is a notch below Kafka."

Isaac: "What are you telling me, that you're gonna leave Emily, is this true? And run away with the winner of the Zelda Fitzgerald emotional maturity award?"

Attended by the usual fretful pondering on the big issues — love, death, Groucho Marx, the crab at Sam Woo's — the narrative of *Manhattan* is provided by a lopsided love triangle. Isaac is dating Tracy (Mariel Hemingway), a 17-year-old high-schooler, but is inexorably falling for his best friend's mistress, Mary (Diane Keaton). Meanwhile his ex-wife (Meryl Streep), who left him for another woman, is writing a book that threatens to reveal any number of embarrassing things about him. It's vintage Woody, a simple set-up that offers endless opportunity for middle-aged angst, romantic dithering and killer dialogue.

In the light of Allen's — how shall we put this? — unusual marriage (to a woman 35 years his junior, the adopted

**"ELOQUENCE, WISTFUL REFLECTION AND SOME OF THE FUNNIEST LINES EVER TO COME FROM WOODY ALLEN."**








The three women in Isaac's (Woody Allen) life: girlfriends Mary (Diane Keaton, above), and Tracy (Mariel Hemingway, top right) and ex-wife Jill (Meryl Streep, above right).

daughter of his ex-partner Mia Farrow and her then husband, André Previn), certain viewers will regard *Manhattan*, and Isaac's conspicuously sexual relationship with Tracy, with disdain — or worse. And, let's face it, the fact that she's 17, dead-on the age of consent in New York, is a little perturbing. But there's nothing creepy about Isaac and Tracy's relationship on screen. It's actually quite touching, not least because she is by degrees more mature than he is, emotionally and otherwise; there's no Zelda Fitzgerald Award in her future. And Allen is being honest here. He based Isaac and Tracy on the relationship he had with actress Stacey Nelkin while she was a student at New York's Stuyvesant High School — were he a Bergman, a Fellini or a Louis Malle, he'd be praised for his candour. Typically, he deals with the situation with style. "She's 17," muses Isaac. "I'm 42 and she's 17. I'm older than her father, can you believe that? I'm dating a girl wherein I can beat up her father."

There is a greater honesty to *Manhattan*, too. Allen's detractors have accused him of narrow vision, his films — certainly from this period — charting the same territory, re-hashing character stereotypes and refusing to stray from the elite enclave of the Upper East Side. And, barring the odd foray into Greenwich Village or the SoHo art ghetto, that's largely true.

But Allen is an Upper East Side artist-intellectual, and his 'New York' films draw on and reflect the world he knows as surely as Scorsese's or Spike Lee's reflect theirs.

It's ironic, then, that Woody Allen hates the film. It's not clear exactly why. Perhaps it fell short of his aspirations, not uncommon with love letters. Revisiting the film, it's hard to believe that. Anyone can shoot a black-and-white movie in Manhattan, bung in some Gershwin and make it look romantic (or they could before it turned into Disneyland). But only Woody can give it this kind of glow; a personal sense of time and place that instils yearning, even if you've never been further east than Sydney Harbour. He obviously does idolise it all out of proportion. And despite its absurd self-mythologising, you're drawn back to Isaac's line from the opening scene: "New York was his town. And it always would be..." Although the coiled sexual power of a jungle cat? Not so much. **SIMON BRAUND**

# My Brilliant Career

## Gillian Armstrong's passionate rebellion continues to hit hard

**1979** / CERT **15** /
DIRECTOR
**GILLIAN ARMSTRONG** /
SCREENWRITER
**ELEANOR WITCOMBE** /
CAST **JUDY DAVIS, SAM NEILL, WENDY HUGHES**

SILVER MEDALLIST IN some departments — for example, it was the second Australian film to ever compete at Cannes — pot-stirring period piece *My Brilliant Career* is more aligned with firsts: the debut feature of Australia's most internationally successful female director, Gillian Armstrong; Judy Davis' first lead role; Sam Neill's Australian breakthrough.

Perhaps most appropriately for a landmark production that still remains an anomaly for its dominant XX-chromosome creative team (Armstrong, producer Margaret Fink, associate producer Jane Scott, screenwriter Eleanor Witcombe, production designer Luciana Arrighi, costume designer Anna Senior), *My Brilliant Career* was also the first Australian film directed by a woman in 46 years.

Celebrating its 37th birthday this year, the AFI Award-winning adaptation of Miles Franklin's revolutionary 1901 novel about a young woman's fiery struggle for uncompromising independence in a man's world wields a lingering message of gender struggle, reinforced by those delivering it.

The trials and costs of such rebellion reverberate through *My Brilliant Career*, a rallying cry for female empowerment which marches to a legendary "unhappy happy ending". The commitment and intensity of aspiring author Sybylla Melvyn (Davis) in the 1890s, as she gives a two-fingered salute to tradition, hasn't diminished. Hollywood's often conservative approach to women, love and work continues to be at odds with the radical attitude coursing through Armstrong's refined call-to-arms which, ironically, wasn't followed by an off-camera movement seemingly heralded by *My Brilliant Career*.

Almost four decades have passed since 27-year-old Armstrong became the female face of Australia's 1970s 'New Wave', alongside burgeoning directors who also went on to forge global careers — Peter Weir, Bruce Beresford, Fred Schepisi and Phillip Noyce. No other





Sybylla (Judy Davis) gives Harry (Sam Neill) what-for.

female director since has come close to trailblazer Armstrong's longevity.

Margaret Fink had spent years trying to film *My Brilliant Career*, the bestselling proto-feminist tale (Henry Lawson passed the manuscript to his Scottish publishers). Franklin denied the novel was autobiographical, undeterred by all the similarities between its central character and her own rural upbringing and artistic ambitions. Irrespective of origins, Sybylla's wilful denunciation of convention and expectation extended beyond the page and into the blooming gender warfare of the 1970s.

The early incarnation of the Australian Film Commission knocked back Fink's project because it felt Sybylla's unusual relationship with Harry Beecham (Neill) would repel audiences and result in a box-office dud.

Self-confessed "libertarian" Fink and her dedicated troupe refused to alter a sad but apt finale which upholds Sybylla's desire for individuality, no matter the cost.

**"JUDY DAVIS IS SENSATIONAL AS THE KNOWINGLY HEADSTRONG HEROINE FIGHTING THE POWER."**

Their stubborn stance paid off. A critical and commercial success at home and abroad, economic yet sumptuous *My Brilliant Career* rocketed Armstrong to international acclaim. *The Washington Post* described her as "the most sensitive and accomplished woman director in the English-speaking world".

How a debutante could be so praised is made clear from the expertly composed opening sequence. As Sybylla reads from her memoir, Armstrong has Davis stay inside a lonely farmhouse as a dust storm causes chaos outside. Sybylla's admission of ego and seeking a life far from menial servitude is underlined by the physical cocoon separating her from the back-breaking drudgery she soon will leave, to navigate social and emotional challenges while staying with wealthy, traditional relatives.

The smooth tracking of cinematographer Don McAlpine breathes, and captures the evocative European influence blowing handsomely through all aspects of a costume drama that bites the corset trying to restrain it.

But the provocative film is permeated by a modern urgency and sense of examination not regularly found in painterly landscapes and elegant dining sequences. When drippy gent Frank Hawdon (Robert Grubb, also making his screen debut) gives Sybylla flowers, she barely waits until he's left before tossing them away. Her opposition to the chauvinism he represents is starkly reinforced moments later by the childish abandon with which she dances in the rain. "I'm going to have a career, not marriage," Sybylla succinctly states.

Incredibly, another actress (whose identity remains under wraps) was originally cast as Sybylla, until she failed a 35mm screen test. Her replacement, Davis, is sensational as the knowingly headstrong heroine fighting the power. Unafraid to dive into merciless body-image attacks (Sybylla agrees she's not pretty enough to land a man) and able to nimbly swing from petulant to vulnerable, wild Davis invites sympathy even when Sybylla's single-minded nonconformity sacrifices true love.

Surrounded by a superb support cast sharply representing facets of how a woman should be (Wendy Hughes, Patricia Kennedy, Aileen Britton), Neill also exudes star quality as the strapping chap falling for the wrong-but-right sheila. Harry goes close to being a perfect gent, his enduring quest to support spirited Sybylla in pointed contrast with the men and women looking to control her. But Neill's astute handling of Harry's tacky introduction to Sybylla, and his inflamed proposal, usher in realistic flaws which engender empathy.

Like so many of the cast and crew, Davis, Neill and Armstrong deservedly went on to bigger things. At least in Armstrong's case, her brilliant career has rarely been better — or more influential — than where it all began. **BEN MCEACHEN**

# Star Wars: Episode V The Empire Strikes Back

## Tales from the dark side

**1980** / CERT **U** / DIRECTOR **IRVIN KERSHNER** / SCREENWRITERS **LEIGH BRACKETT, LAWRENCE KASDAN** / CAST **MARK HAMILL, HARRISON FORD, CARRIE FISHER, BILLY DEE WILLIAMS**

WHEN *NEW YORK Times* critic Vincent Canby proclaimed, "The Force is with us, indeed, and a lot of it is hot air," George Lucas' heart must have sunk. After a nightmare shoot that sucked the Lucasfilm coffers dry, Lucas had everything riding on the difficult middle film of his *Star Wars* trilogy.

There had been high-profile sequels before, but no film had had the weight of Hollywood resting on its shoulders to such a degree, after *Star Wars* (the *Episode IV: A New Hope* subtitle wouldn't be added until 1981) had changed the face of moviemaking, becoming a cultural phenomenon in the process. Event cinema was here, and it was expensive. Lucas cut a revolutionary deal with Fox wherein it would distribute the film while he covered the budget with loans and his own money, but soon enough he was in debt for $33 million as the budget spiralled out of control. Despite the success of *Star Wars*, Lucas was taking a huge risk. "At first I was contemplating selling the whole thing to Fox... I'd just take my percentage and go home and never think about *Star Wars* again. But the truth of it is, I got captivated by the thing," Lucas said.

There were likely moments where Lucas wished he had got out, even before some of the more scathing reviews came in. Such escape fantasies probably began back when the crew headed to the frozen tundra of Finse in Norway, doubling as Hoth, during one of worst winters to hit northern Europe. As temperatures plunged, the filmmakers were stranded by avalanches and scenes became impossible to shoot as film stock snapped in the icy wind.

As tough as they were to film, the scenes on the ice planet proved to be a dazzling opener for *The Empire Strikes Back*, delivering the spectacle that rabid fans craved. By the closing credits, however, the open-ended sequel had left more questions unanswered than anticipated: Han Solo's (Harrison Ford) fate hung in the balance as his frozen-in-carbonite body was left in the dubious care of bounty hunter Boba Fett; the every-cryptic Yoda mysteriously spoke of there being "another", and Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) now had a new robot hand and some serious daddy issues to contend with. And although it may now seem passé thanks to its standing as a ubiquitous pop culture reference, the "I am your father" moment in *Empire* gave audiences at the time one of the biggest shocks in cinematic history. Even Darth Vader actor David Prowse, who sat atop Lucas' list of worst plot-leakers, was unaware of the twist until he saw the finished film: a fake line was used on set to secure the secret and ensure Prowse didn't blab.

Big-mouthed thespians were the least of Lucas' problems as they returned to the familiar, and more controllable, environs of Elstree Studios in Hertfordshire, where 60 sets were constructed (more than twice those built for the first film). Hamill was finding his pivotal scenes in the purpose-built Dagobah bog with Yoda the Jedi Master (who *The New Yorker*'s Pauline Kael unkindly claimed looked like a wonton and talked like a fortune cookie) particularly taxing. He felt alone and removed acting opposite a Muppet; it was a sombre mood that overshadowed the whole shoot. Then there was the little matter of a debilitating fire on the set of Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*, filming directly next door.

With scenes having to be reworked on set and a cast at a low ebb, time was running out. And, to Lucas' growing frustration, his director showed no sign of speeding up. "It has to be slower and more lyrical," Irvin Kershner mused about his leisurely approach to the space opera. "The themes have to be more interior." Kershner was Lucas' film instructor and mentor at the University of California. Where Lucas had an eye for spectacle and the big set-piece, Kershner wanted *Empire* to focus on the human drama and to that end, his love of improvisation was a major influence on the film. It also gave the series one of its most iconic lines: Han Solo's response when Leia declares her love for the smuggler. Kershner found the scripted line, "I love you, too," sappy and got Ford to improvise again and again, much to the overheating crew's frustration, until the actor delivered *that* line on the final take: "I know." Lucas hated it; the



**"KERSHNER WANTED *THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK* TO FOCUS ON THE HUMAN DRAMA."**

director thankfully stuck to his guns.

Kershner, whose previous films included *Raid On Entebbe* and the Faye Dunaway thriller *The Eyes Of Laura Mars*, was never an obvious choice. He constantly butted heads with his producer, but the resulting clash of styles gave *Empire* a unique position in the *Star Wars* oeuvre: Kershner was the one man who managed to invest a *Star Wars* movie with his own identity.

When finally released, *The Empire Strikes Back* recouped Lucas' entire $33 million outlay in three months, going on to make over $538 million worldwide. But more than that, *Empire* proved Lucas was a master storyteller, and with his ideas in someone else's hands, that blockbusters could have a soul among the spectacle. **DAVID MICHAEL BROWN**



Vader (David Prowse) and Luke (Mark Hamill) could use some counselling. **Below:** Leia (Carrie Fisher) and Han (Harrison Ford) play pass the Polo mint.

# MODERN TIMES
# 1981-PRESENT DAY

**Reinventions, rare adaptations and the rise of the Sundance kids: the eclectic and magnificent treats between the blockbusters**

# Das Boot

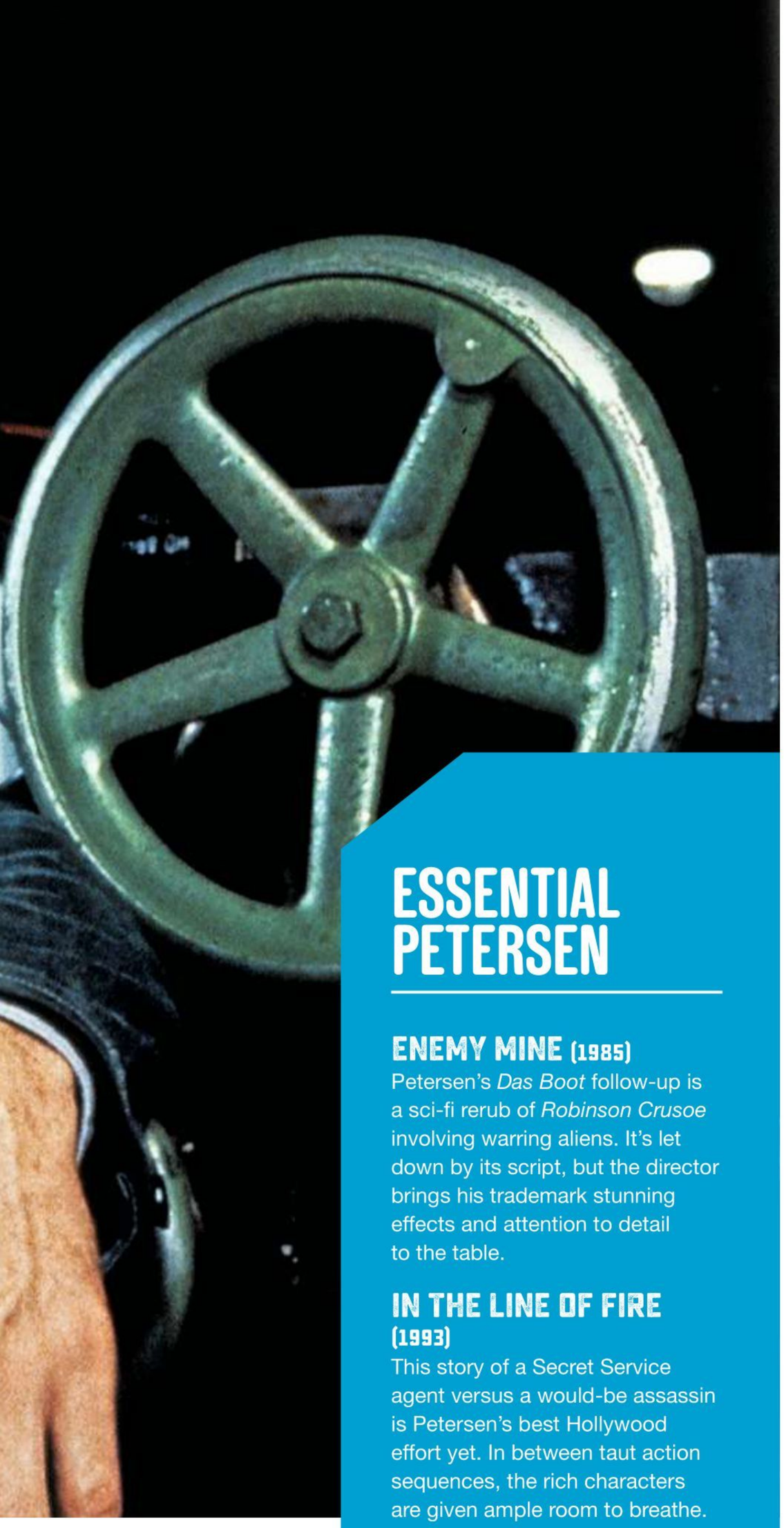
## The Godfather(land) of submarine films

**1981** / CERT **15** / DIRECTOR **WOLFGANG PETERSEN** / SCREENWRITER **BRÁULIO MANTOVANI** / CAST **JÜRGEN PROCHNOW, HERBERT GRÖNEMEYER, KLAUS WENNEMANN**

A MOVIE SET almost entirely in a clammy sea vessel and running to more than three hours in its restored version would seem to ask a lot from its audience. But back in 1981, throughout a highly testing year-long shoot at Munich's Bavaria Film Studios, *Das Boot* demanded even more from its cast of would-be submariners. For starters, director Wolfgang Petersen insisted that his actors avoid going out into sunlight for the entire summer for fear they'd tarnish the authentic pallor they had developed after spending months inside a big metal tube. Complementing their newly chalky complexions, the cast developed ragged beards, which for continuity's sake they couldn't shave. Then there was the infernal heat, the cramped space, the smell, the sweat, the showers of sparks and torrents of icy water...

Far from being a sadist, Petersen's obsession for detail stemmed from his humanitarian desire to show the world the hell that the U-boat crews of the Third Reich had endured. The events of the film unfold during the winter of 1941. By that time, thanks largely to Hitler's disdain for naval policy, the Second Battle Of The Atlantic had already been virtually lost by the Wehrmacht. Not that the German public had any inkling of this. Fuelled by Nazi propaganda tales of glorious seabound adventure, young men signed up to set sail for their *Führer* aboard a hi-tech *Unterseeboot*. As *Das Boot* so masterfully illustrates, the reality was very different. The opening sequences, set in a shoreside beer hall in La Rochelle, contrast the raucous celebrations of Hitler's new recruits with the cynical weariness of their captain (a magnificent Jürgen Prochnow) and the burned-out malaise of a naval hero (Otto Sander). Awarded a medal, the latter drunkenly litters his speech with anti-Nazi sentiments. Both men know what horrors lie beyond the harbour.

While writing his screenplay, Petersen had stuck closely to the factually based novel by ex-war correspondent Lothar-Günther Buchheim, represented in the movie by Herbert Grönemeyer's wet-behind-the-ears Lieutenant Werner. But when the time came to reconstruct



Jürgen Prochnow as sympathetic U-boat captain Lt Henrich Lehmann-Willenbrock.

## ESSENTIAL PETERSEN

### ENEMY MINE (1985)
Petersen's *Das Boot* follow-up is a sci-fi rerub of *Robinson Crusoe* involving warring aliens. It's let down by its script, but the director brings his trademark stunning effects and attention to detail to the table.

### IN THE LINE OF FIRE (1993)
This story of a Secret Service agent versus a would-be assassin is Petersen's best Hollywood effort yet. In between taut action sequences, the rich characters are given ample room to breathe.

### AIR FORCE ONE (1997)
"Get off my plane!" For cheesy, old-school action heroics, this President-in-peril blockbuster is hard to beat. Slick, clever fun.

### THE PERFECT STORM (2000)
Petersen returns to the ocean, this time hurling giant waves at his characters rather than torpedoes, and proves as adept at CGI as at physical effects.

### POSEIDON (2006)
Like the old man in Hemingway's tale, Petersen can't resist the lure of the sea. The murky thrills here see a return to *Das Boot*'s claustrophobia — and there's even a shot that homages his U-boat classic.

the U-96 itself, he took his quest for reality to a new level. After heading to the Chicago Museum Of Science And Industry to study the only existing type IX-C U-boat, his team assembled two full-scale mock-ups — an exterior and an interior — and even drilled in the type of screws used during World War II. (One impressed person was Steven Spielberg, who borrowed the sub shell mid-shoot for Indy to straddle in *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*; to Petersen's horror, it sank two weeks after being returned.) Unlike Hollywood subs, the interior set had no moving walls. Once in, the actors were forced to endure the same conditions as their real-life characters, with 48 men packed into a boat that in peacetime held 24.

Circling around the grey limbo of the choppy Atlantic, these soldiers experienced one of the purest forms of warfare: interminably long, agonisingly tense stretches of waiting broken up by sudden bursts of nerve-shredding action. With his 1998 extended cut of the film, Petersen makes both sides of the equation even starker. Many of the reconstituted scenes are devoted to just showing the men killing time, whether toying with food and skirting around politics in the officer's mess, or picking their noses in the filthy living quarters. Few films have dared to dwell so long on the tedious nature of combat, but as a result of these very human vignettes, something odd happens — we begin to forget that these men sail under a swastika flag. And like them, we start to get a strange yearning for a taste of the action. Yet when that action finally arrives, it's a brutal barrage to rival anything seen on the screen.

Though "seen" is probably the wrong word. This being a submarine, the only glimpse of the surface world is through a spindly periscope. So, when British destroyers attack with a ferocious succession of depth charges, all the men in this primitive vessel can really do is listen. At the time, the sounds of impact were marked out by technicians smashing on the set's walls with hammers; in post-production, powerful sound effects were expertly layered onto the action. Witness the tour de force set-piece in which the hulking U-96 is forced to plunge far below safe depth; the aural storm of detonations, violent creakings and groans of fracturing metal gets the heart pounding like a jack-hammer. Little wonder that two of *Das Boot*'s six nominations at the 1982 Oscars were for its soundtrack. Factor in the physical effects — the explosive leaks, the bolts popping like bullets — and the surreal horror experienced by a sub crew under fire becomes very real.

**"THE SURREAL HORROR EXPERIENCED BY A SUB CREW UNDER FIRE BECOMES VERY REAL."**

This, then, is a rare case of a film's technical brilliance being responsible for its humanism. By *Das Boot*'s tragic climax, we have lost track of sides, forgotten politics, ditched preconceptions. All we've experienced is what the men of the U-96 experienced — the inside of a combat boat. But, in Petersen's hands, that's more than enough to demonstrate the senseless chaos of war. **NICK DE SEMLYEN**

# E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial

## Spielberg's childhood tour de force still flies high

**1982** / CERT **U** / DIRECTOR **STEVEN SPIELBERG** / SCREENWRITER **MELISSA MATHISON** / CAST **HENRY THOMAS, DREW BARRYMORE, PETER COYOTE**

CARLO RAMBALDI HAD, of course, worked with Steven Spielberg before. The diminutive Italian special effects maestro assisted in the design of the beatific aliens who sashay out of the Mothership to hand-jive with François Truffaut at the end of *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*. Now, though, the American director was asking the impossible. Design a creature ugly on the surface, although never scary, and yet unmistakably sympathetic, if not borderline holy. His body should be squat, about a child's height, and his motions gentle. Mother Teresa in a lizard's skin. With giant, orb-like eyes, Spielberg insisted; we need to glimpse an alien soul. On a subconscious level, we should almost recognise this sentient toad left stranded on Earth, cooing curiously over the soft, winking light of a Californian estate nestled in a wooded valley. It is always the way with masterpieces — they make the impossible look obvious.

*E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* began as a subplot to *Night Skies*, the early incarnation of *Close Encounters*, which intended to ply its wonderment in a darker vein. In amongst a spate of alien activity, a terrified celestial being is left behind by his startled crew to find sanctuary with an autistic child. The theme of abandonment nestled in the director's head, and shortly before departing to shoot *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*, he commissioned Melissa Mathison to expand the idea into a feature-length script. What she delivered he considered perfect, although over two more drafts he would add the fizz of the bike chase and subtract Elliott's pre-existing comedic best friend.

If Mathison's sublime words fixed the mood, the cherished iconography is all Spielberg. In every sense, *E.T.* opens in a key of universal terror: a rattling keychain at the waist of a faceless man symbolising jeopardy as he tracks this forsaken creature through a Grimm forest. The camera takes up position at E.T.'s eye level, and remains gazing upward for much of the running time. Apart from Dee Wallace's mother, Mary, for the first half of the movie no adult is seen from above waist height. This is a child's universe, a forest thick with hurt and fear and exaltation. Essential to the Spielberg-Mathison concept is Elliott (Henry Thomas) — the lost boy. As Richard Dreyfuss embodied the man-child suburban hero in *Close Encounters*, so Thomas becomes the yearning child-man of ordinary America — each of them tributaries of Spielberg himself. It is a telling characteristic of the young maestro how he grounded the fantastical in personal experience. Elliott mourns an absent father, as Spielberg had wrestled with his parents' split. The cover name for the shoot was *A Boy's Life*.

Crucially, this is a small film: bound to a single Californian neighbourhood, dialogue-heavy and, beyond the floating bikes and Rambaldi's seraphic co-star, relatively slim on special effects. After the scarifying atmosphere of the opening, the enchanting mid-section toys with satire as E.T. gropes his way through human habits: watching TV, guzzling beer, and becoming Gertie's (Drew Barrymore) plaything. So routine is Mary's daily shift, she misses him. All the while, he transmits his delight in discovery directly to Elliott. This is a species that communicates via radio waves of pure feeling, a planet of glowing-fingered Spielbergs.

Another impossibility that came so readily to *E.T.* is its fusion of opposing sensibilities: the glib escapism of the blockbuster and the keener purposes of '70s Hollywood. Aliens heal by touch,



bikes swoop magically through the air, the kids forever a step ahead of the adults: the feather-light matter of matinée dreams. The weather patterns alone are insane. Sun-baked by day, misty as a fairy tale by night. But here is real life. Familiar household clutter shot in halos of smoky light as if the house itself is laid low, abandoned. A broken home.

In this, the extraordinary Wallace is vital. A mother, no longer a wife, her reaction to the cruel jab of news that Mary's ex is in Mexico with his new lover tells you infinitely more than a line of dialogue. This is a woman straining to

**"LOVE PULLS ON THE FILM LIKE GRAVITY, SOMETHING IRREVOCABLE, THE TRUE FORCE THAT BINDS THE GALAXY TOGETHER."**

Elliott (Henry Thomas) and E.T. look to the skies.

contain her dignity in front of her own children. Finally discovering that her son has harboured a stricken alien, she wrenches him away from the screaming creature, driven by primal necessity to protect her child. It is one of the most distressing sequences in American cinema, lurching into terror as she confronts an astronaut at her door framed in nuclear light. And people insist on calling *E.T.* feel-good.

Name another blockbuster to uncover such despair. This surely is the perfection the director grasped in Mathison's script: that it was primarily concerned with the perils and mysteries of life on Earth. Most acute of which is the depiction of a boy's life, caught in a hinterland between child and adolescent, desperate for contact. Elliott is as symbolically displaced as the alien, and Thomas' ability to convey his loneliness without a false note is another miracle. Elliott is by turns sulky or ecstatic, a trial to his mother and a nuisance to his older brother (Robert MacNaughton), as Barrymore's younger sister Gertie is to him. These are family dynamics as effortlessly authentic as Elliott's poetic introduction of E.T. to his collection of *Star Wars* figures: "This is Lando Calrissian, see..." Love pulls on the film like gravity, something irrevocable, the true Force that binds the galaxy together. E.T. finds Elliott as much as Elliott lures his "goblin" with a trail of candy.

The great gift this movie grants is that we too are bonded to both E.T. and Elliott. We feel their feelings. Spielberg's masterpiece (we'll save the arguments for *Jaws* for elsewhere) is a fulfilment of the potential of cinema to transfigure fantasy into truth, and let our emotions take flight. The perfect fairy tale, *E.T.* teaches us the ultimate lesson: how to be human. **IAN NATHAN**

# Fitzcarraldo

## Werner Herzog's insane pursuit of an insane dream

**1982** / CERT **PG** / DIRECTOR **WERNER HERZOG** / SCREENWRITER **WERNER HERZOG** / CAST **KLAUS KINSKI, CLAUDIA CARDINALE, JOSÉ LEWGOY**

SOMETIME IN THE summer of 1979, German director Werner Herzog travelled to Hollywood for a pre-production meeting with 20th Century Fox to discuss plans for his new film, *Fitzcarraldo*. He did not find it to be an encouraging experience. "The unquestioned assumption is that a plastic model ship will be pulled over a ridge in a studio, or possibly a botanical garden that is not far from here," he recorded, dismayed, in his diary (published in English for the first time in 2009 as *Conquest Of The Useless: Reflections From The Making Of Fitzcarraldo*). That wasn't his idea at all. How would a toy boat and a greenhouse ever do justice to this "vision which had seized hold of me like the demented fury of a hound that has sunk his teeth into the leg of a deer carcass and is shaking and tugging at the downed game [so much] that the hunter gives up trying to calm him... [A vision of] a large steamship scaling a hill under its own steam, working its way up a steep slope in the jungle, while above... soars the voice of Caruso, silencing all the pain and the voices of the primeval forest and drowning out all birdsong"?

With a vision like that, a model-boat kit and rhubarb just won't cut it. It's almost impossible that a movie anything like *Fitzcarraldo* could be made today. But then, it was almost impossible that a movie anything like *Fitzcarraldo* could have been made in 1982. That didn't stop



There's a storm comin'... or in Klaus Kinski's case as Fitzcarraldo, already on set.

Herzog, whose obsession with the jungle and driven, borderline-insane characters found its perfect expression in the true story of Carlos Fermin Fitzcarrald, a rubber baron of mixed Irish/American and Peruvian descent who, as well as behaving pretty dismally to the Peruvian natives, once really did haul a ship from one river system to another over a mountain. (Fitzcarrald had the common sense to dismantle his boat first and his project was a success, though he died in the accident that finally sank his steamer — should you ever be in the Puerto Maldonado area of Peru, you can still view its mouldering remains.)

In Herzog's screenplay, Fitzcarrald becomes Brian Sweeney 'Fitzcarraldo' Fitzgerald, a dreamer who determines to bring opera to the jungle, and in order to do so decides to make a killing in the rubber trade, and to do that decides to introduce a ship to an otherwise virgin river system. But, uniquely, this film of one man's insane dream would be mirrored by the film director's insane project of making the film a reality. Herzog would haul a real boat over a real jungle mountain using only indigenous labour and rudimentary technology. Thus the story of *Fitzcarraldo* is bound with the story of Herzog making *Fitzcarraldo*.

The trials of the shoot became the stuff of legend. Herzog, funding the movie at this stage from his own pocket (20th Century Fox having long-since waved goodbye), spent two years in the jungle prepping the film before a foot of celluloid was exposed. As he built camps and worked out how you actually do get a steamer over a mountain, the bloated bodies of soldiers killed in the ongoing war between Peru and Ecuador would occasionally float by. Meanwhile, the local workers engaged in often bloody tribal warfare. Forty per cent of the film was shot when would-be star Jason Robards dropped out and with him Mick Jagger (set to play Brian's assistant), who by then had to honour his commitments to a Rolling Stones tour. Herzog briefly contemplated playing the role himself, before no doubt sighing and picking up the phone and calling Klaus Kinski, his muse and nemesis. Though it must not have seemed it at the time, this was a stroke of luck. Kinski yelled and screamed his way through production to the point that local tribes people, taking pity on Herzog, offered to kill him, and the movie now had to be re-shot in German. But as Fitzcarraldo he is the living heart of the film; the embodiment of a crazed, blessed lunatic in a white suit listening to scratchy opera records in the middle of the green hell. (His performance is all the more remarkable since, as Herzog sniffily reports, Kinski's own relationship with the jungle was less than authentic — "He never ventured more than ten feet outside the camp except to have his photograph taken for magazine fashion spreads.")

What emerged from the jungle is by no means perfect. Its critics are probably right — it sometimes meanders as lazily as the Rio Camisea on which it was filmed, but it is a unique movie. Cinema of the '70s had been dominated by a kind of hip cynicism driven, as a thousand postgraduate theses will inform you, by America's disastrous Vietnam experience. *Taxi Driver*, *Apocalypse Now* and *Raging Bull* all pensively explored the darker, more hopeless side of human life. In the midst of these withering movies, *Fitzcarraldo* shone, and still shines, as one of cinema's most thrillingly optimistic films. It's an exultant paean to the possibilities of the human spirit unleashed that throws you back onto the street, opera ringing in your ears, ready to find your own boat and pull it over a bloody mountain. **ADAM SMITH**

**"STILL SHINES AS ONE OF CINEMA'S MOST THRILLINGLY OPTIMISTIC FILMS."**

# Scarface

## "Say hello to my little friend"

**1983** / CERT **18** / DIRECTOR **BRIAN DE PALMA** / SCREENWRITER **OLIVER STONE** / CAST **AL PACINO, MICHELLE PFEIFFER, STEVEN BAUER**

IT IS 1983 and director Brian De Palma is in dire need of a hit. His 1980 film school experiment *Home Movies* may have featured his *The Fury* star Kirk Douglas, but it barely registered at the box office. The John Travolta vehicle *Blow Out*, a deeply personal project, had failed to win audience or critical approval. Success was important to De Palma; his colleagues, Spielberg, Lucas, Scorsese and Coppola, the so-called 'Movie Brats', had seen their careers go from strength to strength. On the other hand, while *Carrie* and *Dressed To Kill* saw him achieve commercial rewards, De Palma was yet to join the big leagues.

Cut to a blood-soaked bathroom in an art-deco apartment on Ocean Drive, Miami Beach. The director looks on as Tony Montana (Al Pacino) is forced, at gun point, to watch as his brother Angel (Pepe Serna) has his leg cut off, chainsaw style, during a botched drug deal with a Colombian drug cartel. Angel's severed arm is already hanging, handcuffed, to the shower rail. Such cold-blooded excess surges through *Scarface*, a loaded-gun project of volatile components that went on to transform De Palma's stock — and the gangster genre.

"CUBANS! COCAINE! AL PACINO! MACHINE GUNS! GIRLS! WOW! That's what I want to see," De Palma told *Esquire* on set of what began life as a straight remake of Howard Hawks' 1932 underworld classic of the same name.

Delivering on his promise, De Palma thrust the ultra-violence of his *Scarface* into the Florida sunshine, far from the concealed depictions of aggression in vintage film noir. But beyond such modern divergences from Hawks' original, what sent this 1980s paean to maniacal corruption into cult classicdom is Montana, a power-mad immigrant living the American dream. He became an anti-hero pin-up, audiences attracted to Pacino's incredible embodiment of psychotic greed. While Montana was, categorically, the bad guy — his downfall inevitable, never glorified — the unrepentant drug baron became a pop-culture icon, more so than any Scorsese mobster. De Palma scored his most successful film to date, even though it was hardly an obvious fit for him. His earlier thrillers — *Sisters*, *Obsession* and *Dressed To Kill* — saw De Palma chastised as a "poor man's Hitchcock". In hindsight, though, fusing De Palma's suspense-ridden bravura set-pieces with the epic tale of a criminal life spiralling out of control is perfect.

Brainchild of *Serpico* producer Martin Bregman, *Scarface* came to De Palma while he was shooting *Blow Out*. He turned it down, due to having his hands full, and Sidney Lumet was briefly attached. When Lumet walked out over script conflicts, De Palma — bruised by the response to *Blow Out* and desperate to leave his latest assignment, *Flashdance* — signed on.

Written by Oliver Stone — yet to make a name as a director, but still hot after his 1978 Oscar win for *Midnight Express*' screenplay — *Scarface*'s action had been moved to the hot, sweaty climes of Miami during the Mariel boatlift in 1980 (when Cuban refugees were given free entry to the States). The rest is revisonist history.

The political backdrop may have thrilled Stone and De Palma, but it also caused major problems. As soon as the cameras rolled on *Scarface*, protests started. Despite having not read the script, the local Cuban community was incensed at its portrayal as cocaine-dealing, trigger-happy criminals.

While *Scarface* is Pacino's film, the ensemble playing Montana's extended criminal family is also superb. Michelle Pfeiffer (fresh from *Grease 2*) plays Elvira Hancock, the object of Montana's affection and moll to his boss, Frank Lopez (Robert Loggia). Stephen Bauer and Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio as Montana's long-suffering friend, Manny, and sister, Gina, also excel.

Montana's rise and fall, including a delightfully '80s cash-counting montage, is a brutal, violent tragedy that takes no prisoners. Violence was something De Palma knew well. Often admonished for his penchant for on-screen butchery, nothing could have prepared the director for his duel with the American censors. The board rated *Scarface* as "X". Not a big surprise when the "F" bomb is dropped 226 times. The chainsaw battle — vaunted by Tarantino as the precursor to the infamous ear scene in *Reservoir Dogs* — and copious drug use (including Montana face-down in a mountain of cocaine) wouldn't have helped. De Palma had to go into negotiation overdrive to



**"CUBANS! COCAINE! AL PACINO! MACHINE GUNS! GIRLS! WOW! THAT'S WHAT I WANT TO SEE."**

**Above:** Tony Montana (Al Pacino) hanging out with his little friend. **Right:** Michelle Pfeiffer's Elvira, married to the mob.

secure an "R" rating.

When the film premiered on 1 December 1983 in New York City, including a disclaimer to placate Miami's Cuban community, the response was mixed. Reviews focused on the blood-letting and profanity. Even *New Yorker* film critic Pauline Kael, normally De Palma's staunchist supporter, knocked it as "a sloppy piece of moviemaking."

Time has been kinder to De Palma's cult classic: the garish fashions, outrageous dialogue and extreme bloodletting constantly bringing *Scarface* to new followers. And while dozens of pretenders have tried to appropriate *Scarface*'s shocking portrayal of the criminal underworld, few come close to matching it. There will only ever be one Tony Montana.

"Say goodbye to the bad guy."

**DAVID MICHAEL BROWN**



# Back To The Future

## The power of (Oedipal) love played for laughs in Robert Zemeckis' timeless classic

**1985** / CERT **PG** / DIRECTOR **ROBERT ZEMECKIS** / SCREENWRITERS **ROBERT ZEMECKIS, BOB GALE** / CAST **MICHAEL J FOX, CHRISTOPHER LLOYD, LEA THOMPSON**

FITTINGLY, THE HISTORY of *Back To The Future* is littered with intriguing 'what ifs': what if co-writer Bob Gale had never found his father's high-school yearbook in his parents' basement, prompting him to wonder if the two would be friends had they been classmates? What if 1984 mega-hit *Romancing The Stone*, directed by *BTTF* director/co-writer Robert Zemeckis, had been a flop, denying him the Hollywood currency to get whatever he wanted made (pre-*Romancing The Stone*, the *BTTF* script had been rejected by every studio in town)? What if Universal head Sid Sheinberg had got his way and had the film retitled 'Spaceman From Pluto', and it had been released starring original Marty McFly Eric Stoltz (whose four weeks of filming were famously binned when the filmmakers realised the Method actor wasn't nailing the comedic tone)?

*Back To The Future*'s gestation and eventual birth may seem miraculous, but on paper, so does its ultimate critical and box office success. Here was a film that brazenly threw science-fiction, comedy, romance and a rose-tinted dollop of nostalgia into a blender, the resulting mix siphoned through a skateboarding 1980s teenager who we were asked to believe was friends with a middle-aged, time travel-inventing mad scientist. Oh, and the story revolves around the time-travelling teen meeting his teenage mother who promptly *falls in love with her yet-to-be-born son*. Even without the Oedipal plot, nothing about *BTTF* screams 'destined to become beloved by millions and spawn two hit sequels'.

Yet, that is precisely what happened thanks to a stellar, inventive script (for a masterclass in deft, fat-free storytelling where each scene propels you forward and stakes are duly raised, look no further), perfect cast and skilled director. And while it's possible to credit timing with the film connecting with audiences (*BTTF*'s optimistic, prosperous baby-boomer 1950s would've arrived as the perfect tonic for a 1980s middle-class America fatigued from Reaganomics), it ultimately rested on the slight shoulders of a 162cm, Canadian-born Michael Andrew Fox. Largely known at the time as young Republican Alex P Keaton on sitcom *Family Ties*, Fox came equipped with an innate likeability usually reserved for kittens and a formidable comedic timing honed to perfection via the rigours of episodic television. His breezy, affable charm almost single-handedly glosses over the inherent preposterousness of *Back To The Future*'s plot. And consider this: Fox's energetic performance was delivered over a 100-day shoot where he was getting five hours of sleep daily, thanks to shooting *Family Ties* during the day and *BTTF* nights and weekends.

Fox's boyish energy may have kept the pace up, but it was Christopher Lloyd, then 47, who set it with his gigawatt-producing turn as wild-eyed, wild-haired inventor Emmett 'Doc' Brown. The entire cast may be note-perfect, but it's ultimately Lloyd's show: his Doc is a hyper-caffeinated lunatic-genius, emitting an eccentric charisma usually reserved for cult leaders. Doc's appeal to a teen who could be hanging out with his girlfriend instead is apparent, and it's their unlikely loyal friendship and mutual admiration that serves as the film's true heart.

On release, nobody had more riding on *Back To The Future* than the writing team of Robert Zemeckis and Bob Gale: three of their comedies — *I Wanna Hold Your Hand*, *Used Cars* and *1941* — flopped despite Steven Spielberg's involvement (executive producing the first two and directing the latter). The pair must've felt significantly better after initial test screenings saw audiences, according to executive producer Frank Marshall, go "up to the ceiling". The August premiere was moved to 3 July — just over two months after the film's wrap — requiring extra editors to work 24-hour shifts. Their hard graft paid off: *Back To The Future* spent 11 weeks at number one and became 1985's highest-grossing film.

Just over 30 years later, the impact of the film and its sequels is undeniable: 21 October 2015 was celebrated globally as '*Back To The Future* Day', Nike is releasing *Part II*'s 'powerlace' shoes, and actual R&D has been done to make hoverboards a reality. Cool? No doubt, but still window-dressing on what is simply a near-perfect film whose wit, charm and manic sense of adventure remain timeless. **JAMES JENNINGS**



"This sucker's nuclear!" Doctor Emmett Brown (Christopher Lloyd) explains power sources to Marty McFly (Michael J Fox).



John Book (Harrison Ford) and Samuel (Lukas Haas): old-school magic.

# Witness

## Aussie director Peter Weir makes hay

**1985** / CERT **15** / DIRECTOR **PETER WEIR** / SCREENWRITERS **EARL W WALLACE, WILLIAM KELLEY** / CAST **HARRISON FORD, KELLY MCGILLIS, LUKAS HAAS**

SET AND SHOT in 1984, *Witness* has aged better than mullets and Mickey Rourke because it transports audiences further back in time. It reminds them of simple pleasures and vanished arts — not the 18th-century horse-and-trappings of the Amish, but the 1940s Hollywood studio system.

Speaking to *The Los Angeles Times* in 1985, Australian director Peter Weir confessed to crude motives behind his first American movie. "To be honest, I took the assignment because I decided it was a good idea to not just make films which obsessed me. I wanted to be like those '40s directors who took assignments from their studios and got on with them."

The marriage of singular, often foreign talent to solid genre fodder was the catalyst for a slew of classic '40s pictures and the foundation stone of film noir. Weir would join the storied ranks of Otto Preminger, Billy Wilder and Alfred Hitchcock as an émigré director stretching the stereotypical thriller into something suspiciously close to art.

Journeymen TV writers William Kelley and Earl W Wallace would, together, only ever sell one idea to Hollywood, but this shot was golden, and it would take these two humble hacks all the way to the 1986 Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay. Kelley and Wallace earned their spurs on *Gunsmoke*, and the central conceit for *Witness* is a rip and riff from a 1970s episode of that creaky Western: on a trip to the big city with his mother, a young Amish boy witnesses the murder of a cop. The homicide detective assigned to the case uncovers police corruption as the motive for the killing and is forced to hide his witness among the pacifist Amish.

Harrison Ford, back when he always picked a winner, saw the potential early and signed on as homicide detective John Book. Other suitors, however, demurred, unsure what to make of the material. Joe Wizan, head of production at 20th Century Fox, let his first-look option lapse because the studio was not in the business of making "rural movies". John Badham, hot off *WarGames*, turned down the directing job because it was "just another cop movie".

The stage was set for Weir. With the financing for his tropical passion project *The Mosquito Coast* collapsing and the failure of *The Year Of Living Dangerously* still haunting him, Weir was keen to work at short notice. The director of such spare and elemental pictures as *Picnic At Hanging Rock* quickly diagnosed the current screenplay as "halfway good", and he and Ford set about merrily ripping it to pieces, paring it back to what Weir called the "simple mechanism".

Even as Weir edged the thriller out of frame, he gutted the script's romance between detective and widow (Kelly McGillis at her most beguiling), leaving just a few stolen glances and a Sam Cooke song (sung by Greg Chapman). Staying true to his '40s inspiration, Weir decided to "reimpose the Hays Code", as he told the *LA Times*. "In those days of film censorship, moviemakers had to be very inventive in the way they showed sexual attraction. It resulted in some wonderfully romantic films."

Fittingly, *Witness* is short on small talk and long on meaningful looks — the fascinating faces cast by Weir include a Russian ballet dancer, a Canadian opera singer and eight-year-old Lukas Haas as the titular bystander, his Bambi-eyes swimming with expression.

What banter remains in *Witness* is as piquant as it is throwaway. Inside the period romance — that itself nestles inside a taut thriller — is a perfectly formed fish-out-of-water comedy, and the script is shot through with witty one-liners. "Oh, I'm learning a lot about manure," deadpans a bed-ridden Book with only farming literature to entertain him. Material that changes mood with the fitfulness of Melbourne weather finds a perfect foil in Ford, a matinée idol who flits between Clint Eastwood and Cary Grant in the time it takes to change hats.

But even Ford eventually vacates centre stage. By winding the thriller tight and playing the romance as a near-silent movie, Weir relocates the heart of the matter to the rural community of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. From milking to mealtimes, even the smallest rituals of the Pennsylvania Dutch are lavished with full ceremonial import, and framed with nods to 17th-century Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer by cinematographer John Seale (*Rain Man, Mad Max: Fury Road*), on what would be the latter's breakthrough picture. Most famously, the barn-raising scene — stirringly scored by Maurice Jarre — is an ode to joy that occupies five full minutes of a lean running time.

The mechanism set in motion by Kelley and Wallace will soon visit violence on the peaceful Amish, but before plot can have its wicked way, Weir lets every ounce of convention fall away as you are suspended magically in a timeless moment of pure cinema. **COLIN KENNEDY**

**"THE BARN-RAISING SCENE IS AN ODE TO JOY THAT OCCUPIES FIVE FULL MINUTES OF A LEAN RUNNING TIME."**

# The Fly

## Cronenberg's masterpiece still gives us reasons to be afraid... very afraid

**1986** / CERT **18** / DIRECTOR **DAVID CRONENBERG** / SCREENWRITERS **CHARLES EDWARD POGUE, DAVID CRONENBERG** / CAST **JEFF GOLDBLUM, GEENA DAVIS, JOHN GETZ**

THIRTY YEARS ON, David Cronenberg's *The Fly* is itself an "old movie". There's even buzz about remaking it. However, anyone who wants to consider tackling the material — which extends to 1958 and 1986 films based on George Langelaan's *Playboy* short story, three assorted sequels (including the memorably demented *Curse Of The Fly*), a *Simpsons* Hallowe'en episode and sundry imitations — needs to consider whether they can match or better Cronenberg's high-water mark. And, no, just doing with CGI what Cronenberg and effects man Chris Walas did with rubber make-up and rod-puppets doesn't really count. Even if a new fly actually flies, that's not the point.

In 1986, there was already a cycle of great 1950s science-fiction films being remade. *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers*, *The Thing*, *Invaders From Mars* and *Godzilla 1985* were already out, with *Little Shop Of Horrors*, *The Blob*, *Attack Of The 50Ft. Woman* and *Village Of The Damned* in development. There was even a *Plan 10 From Outer Space*. Philip Kaufman's *Body Snatchers* (1978) and John Carpenter's *The Thing* (which pioneered the use of gloopy rubber transformation and gore effects in 1982) successfully re-envisioned paranoid 1950s visions for subsequent decades and, with Cronenberg attached and Mel Brooks' company (hot off *The Elephant Man*) backing the play, there was almost an expectation that a new *Fly* might be good. Or at least, better than Tobe Hooper's *Invaders From Mars*.

Though rarely observed, it's an old Hollywood adage that you're better off remaking a bad film than a masterpiece — Warner Bros kept redoing *The Maltese Falcon* until, on the third try, it got it right. Kurt Neumann's *The Fly* was one of those pictures that managed to stick in everyone's mind without being great, or even very good. Watch it again, and you're struck by the awkward structure, the strange mock-Canadian setting and science that makes the average Roland Emmerich film seem sensible. But it has Vincent Price (always good value), eye-popping colour and mind-stretching CinemaScope, the crackle of the teleportation cabinets, the fly-eye multi-viewpoint of the screaming heroine, the tussle between human hand and fly-claw (referenced in *Dr. Strangelove*) and, immortally, the tiny David Hedison-headed fly screeching, "Help meeee," as the spider's maw reaches for his head. And the fly-in-the-teleporter hook is one of the movie's great premises — a "high concept" before filmmakers thought in those terms.

Charles Edward Pogue, who drafted a script when it was set up with director Robert Bierman (*Vampire's Kiss*) before a family tragedy put Bierman out of the frame, kept the teleportation experiment and the overlooked fly. Pogue's new take was that instead of emerging as a pair of freaks, the scientist and the bug would come through the process as a single individual, two sets of genetic information spliced together at an atomic level and evolving into a human-insect composite which might or might not be viable. Cronenberg did a rewrite, but insisted Pogue be given equal script credit because this basic rethink of Langelaan's idea was what made the new *Fly* possible. In a move which seems even more daring two decades on, Cronenberg cut reams of complication to concentrate on three characters who spend most of their time in a converted warehouse. Of all the *Fly* films, it's the simplest and most affecting, pruning away everything but the hero's relationship with Veronica Quaife (a pop-eyed Geena Davis) and the slow, painful process of becoming inhuman.



The film therefore makes do with the metamorphosis and a restrained eternal triangular relationship (John Getz is suitably smarmy as Veronica's lecherous editor/ex), without feeling the need to invent melodramatic contrivances to extend the action. This monster doesn't go on a rampage to up the film's body count, and in fact only does serious damage to an arm-wrestler's wrist and his romantic rival's extremities — how many other movie monsters manage to get through a film without killing anyone? Brundlefly's designs on Veronica are to transform her, not rend her limb from limb or eat her whole.

**"CAN BE READ AS A METAPHOR FOR THE PROCESSES OF DISEASE AND AGEING, THE PERISHABILITY OF HUMAN TISSUE."**



Seth Brundle (Jeff Goldblum) is transformed in David Cronenberg's invigorating redux of *The Fly*.

Typical of Cronenberg is the combination of graphic sickness and good humour that accompanies Brundle's metamorphosis, which he is at pains always to treat in a philosophical, questioning manner. Jeff Goldblum, redefining a career as well as his character's DNA, graduated from supporting kook to leading man in the role of Seth Brundle. During his elaborate, awkward, tragic transformation into a flesh-mangled hybrid, Brundle is simultaneously the film's hero and villain. Goldblum casually commands the screen, whether tossing off nervous remarks about his collection of dropped-off body parts, giving an amusingly disgusting TV chef-like demonstration of the fly-esque manner in which he consumes a doughnut, humming *I Know An Old Lady Who Swallowed A Fly* in a pensive moment, or generally treating his mutation as a voyage of discovery.

In the 1980s, you couldn't make a vampire or werewolf picture without critics seeing metaphors for cocaine addiction or AIDS. Cronenberg had been dealing with the physical issues inherent in his version of *The Fly* since the early 1970s, in films like *Shivers*, *Rabid* and *The Brood* — but there's no denying that the contemporary audience picked up on specific vibes as Seth suddenly becomes a hyperactive motormouth advocate of his new transformative process and then gradually loses his looks to the purposeful malady overtaking his form. A version of *The Fly* made in any other decade wouldn't have had characters terrified by the (erroneous) supposition that Brundle's syndrome might be catching. Veronica now looks exactly like the survivor partners of self-destructive hedonists who pop up to give interviews on "the way we were" shows about pop figures cut down by bad drugs or "the bug" in that grim decade. Like many of Cronenberg's horrors, *The Fly* can be read as a metaphor for the processes of disease and ageing, and finally comes to an acceptance of the perishability of human tissue as the transformed-beyond-possibility Brundle accepts death at the hands of one who loves him. **KIM NEWMAN**

# Platoon

## War is hell: that's the Stone-cold truth

**1986** / CERT **15** / DIRECTOR **OLIVER STONE** / SCREENWRITER **OLIVER STONE** / CAST **CHARLIE SHEEN, TOM BERENGER, WILLEM DAFOE**

OLIVER STONE WASN'T always Oliver Stone. Nope, before he became the Oscar-winning cinema provocateur, he was Oliver Stone the rich kid. Oliver Stone the Yale dropout. Oliver Stone the stoner. Oliver Stone the Vietnam War volunteer. Not only did Stone freely enlist for the imperialistic campaign that attracted the most destructive and sustained criticism of US foreign policy before Dubya invaded the Middle East, the son of a New York stockbroker came home with a Purple Heart (with one Oak Leaf Cluster) and a Bronze Star for "extraordinary acts of courage under fire".

He also came home with a view of the Vietnam War opposed to the one propagated by John Wayne's *The Green Berets* (1968). Returning from 17 months' service in November of the same year as Wayne's anti-Communist justification was released, Stone joined the throng who questioned why LBJ and Nixon were sending troops to an "unwinnable" conflict in Asia.

Though hard to believe now, Stone's opinions about the war might never have hit screens and won four Academy Awards (including Best Picture and Director). For a decade, his *Platoon* script was rejected. Graduating in 1971 from New York University's film school — his mentor was some guy called Martin Scorsese — Stone worked a bit with his mate, Troma co-founder Lloyd Kaufman, before establishing himself as a screenwriter with 1978's *Midnight Express* (for which he won an Oscar). His increasing prominence as a pen-for-hire on *Conan The Barbarian*, *Scarface* and *Year Of The Dragon* delivered Stone the kind of flak and backslaps he would later automatically generate. But it didn't help his *Platoon* picture get up, as studios retreated from a war movie that was "too grim", as Stone told *Playboy* in 1988. "It was too depressing. It wouldn't make a buck. Too real. Who cares?" Stone did.

As Charlie Sheen ably demonstrates on screen as new recruit Chris Taylor (*Platoon*'s lead character, modelled closely upon Stone during his service), this willing combatant gradually transforms from a naive, patriotic grunt to a hard-edged, frazzled dissident. A considered rebuttal to *Green Berets*, Stone wanted to welcome audiences into the jungles "near the Cambodian border", where *Platoon* introduces us to Taylor and his memorable company (a prescient line-up of talent, all on the verge of stardom, from Willem Dafoe and Tom Berenger to Johnny Depp, Forest Whitaker and Kevin Dillon).

*Platoon* would become the first in Stone's Vietnam trilogy, which dealt with harsh homecoming (*Born On The Fourth Of July*, landing Stone his second Best Director Oscar) and Vietnamese victims (*Heaven And Earth*). Each film differed in look, feel and focus, the third entry not bringing the noise of its more overt and inflammatory predecessors.

Situated entirely within the Vietnam War itself, *Platoon* was pitched between the hallucinatory symbolism of *Apocalypse Now* and artsy realism of *The Deer Hunter*. Considering how those films were received in the late 1970s, they seemed to have shut the gate on other productions critiquing an unpopular conflict. Not helping Stone was his desire to direct, considering the few films he had made were horror duds (*Seizure*, *The Hand*). His dream of steering a "real" Vietnam War film seemed as crazy as Bunny, the redneck berserker played by Dillon. English producer John Daly finally backed *Platoon* after reading it and another screenplay Stone had written about the equally contentious presence of US forces in a derided South-American civil-war situation. Incredibly, Daly and his Hemsdale Film Corporation told the writer-director he could pick which film he wanted to make first and, as he considered the *Platoon* project to be somewhat cursed, Stone chose *Salvador*.

Critically acclaimed but stiffing at the box office, *Salvador* (1986) was the moment Oliver Stone the firebrand filmmaker emerged. His overt attacks upon what he cited as the White House's support of right-wing militia in unstable El Salvador during the 1980s meshed with what would also become Stone staples — fierce polemic, media analysis, conspiracy theories, a gift for hot potatoes of timely significance, and an affinity for left-wing views (although, in 1997, Stone said: "I don't believe in liberal or conservative... I believe in both").

From this perfect springboard, primed with stylistic confidence and production smarts — he had tricked the Salvadoran Army with a fake script — Stone left El Salvador for wild Luzon Island in the Philippines in February, 1986. The vivid battles and visceral environs of *Platoon* don't attest to Stone's under-the-radar war movie coming in on budget and time, costing $6.5 million to shoot in 54 days. Repeating Francis Ford Coppola's approach of acquiring actual military equipment, and a Sheen to tackle Vietnam on screen, Stone's *Platoon* distanced itself from its predecessors by rigidly following the lot of US soldiers "in the shit" without pulling us out into metaphorical sideshows.

Depicting US troops as drug-taking, trigger-happy psychos, traumatised and made cold-blooded by the theatre of war, was nothing new. But Stone's intimate focus upon the spectrum of personal responses to a tour of duty infuriated viewers on both sides of the political divide who felt *Platoon* ignored the reasons behind this high-cost conflict.

Thus, the iconic image of an arms-raised Dafoe buying it — one of the greatest death scenes committed to film — and Stone's reputation incorrectly pose *Platoon* as the unbridled anti-American apology it's often mistakenly remembered as. A "war, what is it good for?" salvo underpins everything, from Taylor emptying latrines to the ruthless militarism of Berenger's formidable Sgt Barnes. Stone wants viewers to accept warfare as pointless, no matter what has sparked it, and instead devote attention to how those armed to protect deal with the dehumanising, jaded reality of their role.

Shrugging off its troubled gestation, *Platoon* invaded cinemas and awards ceremonies with career-making results. Ahead of Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (shot before *Platoon*) and inspiring copycats, *Platoon* returned a disastrous war and its enduring ramifications to the cultural consciousness with the final poignant revelation by fractured Taylor: "We weren't fighting the enemy — we fought ourselves." **BEN MCEACHEN**

**"OLIVER STONE WANTS VIEWERS TO ACCEPT WARFARE AS POINTLESS, NO MATTER WHAT HAS SPARKED IT."**



War is hell: The men of *Platoon* on patrol.

# Die Hard

## How a TV star, a Eurotrash villain and two bare feet add up to a classic

**1988** / CERT **18** / DIRECTOR **JOHN MCTIERNAN** / SCREENWRITERS **JEB STUART, STEVEN E DE SOUZA** / CAST **BRUCE WILLIS, ALAN RICKMAN, BONNIE BEDELIA**

NEXT TIME YOU find yourself in the City of Angels (that's LA, if you're not clear), take yourself along to Century City. Specifically, to 2121 Avenue Of The Stars, where you'll find a brown steel and glass building towering some 150 metres above its surroundings. The wage-slaves at 20th Century Fox call it their HQ, Fox Plaza. The film fans of the world, however, know it as Nakatomi Plaza, the setting for the movie that many people, from this correspondent to Joey and Chandler from *Friends*, believe is the greatest action movie ever made: *Die Hard*.

In 1987, producer Joel Silver was about to roll cameras on a project based on *Nothing Lasts Forever*, a 1979 novel by ex-cop Roderick Thorp. The film was to feature Detective John McClane, a New York cop visiting his estranged wife in LA for a Christmas party at her company's high-rise base. When terrorists gatecrash the event, McClane finds himself forced into action, armed only with a handgun, his wits and — thanks to a neat plot contrivance — his bare feet. Silver had a title (*Die Hard*), a director (John McTiernan) and a star (Bruce Willis); what he didn't have was the skyscraper where all the action was to take place.

Luckily, 20th Century Fox had just cut the ribbon on their very own multi-million-dollar base and, after considerable wrangling with lawyers over logistics (no daytime filming, and absolutely no blowing shit up), *Die Hard* had its location. Indeed, Silver and Fox considered the building so important that, for the first few weeks of the movie's theatrical run, the Nakatomi/Fox Plaza was alone on the poster.

Eventually, of course, Willis crammed his cranium onto the one-sheet, unlike the movie's villain, Alan Rickman's calculating German criminal Hans Gruber. But by God, he should have made it, for Gruber is possibly the finest screen villain since one Mr D Vader made asthma seem cool.

Previously, bad guys in the action genre had been either simplistic thugs or raving madmen. Gruber, the impeccably dressed, cultured yin to McClane's slobbish, streetwise yang, signalled an influx of urbane, intelligent nemeses. He is so persuasive and charming that you begin to harbour hopes that he might live to sneer another day. Recognising his allure, McTiernan is canny enough to give Gruber a moment of victory halfway through. As his men finally trigger the Nakatomi vault, containing the $640 million of bearer bonds they've come for, McTiernan bathes Rickman in a beatific God-light and reprises Beethoven's *Ode To Joy*, effectively appropriated for the movie as Gruber's theme, giving it a triumphant tweak.

It's testament to Willis that he not only thwarts Gruber's heist, but also Rickman's own audacious attempt to walk away with the movie. Willis had been cast after Richard Gere had passed, prompting Silver to take a $5 million gamble on a guy whose career as a leading man was in danger of stalling. After all, *Blind Date* and *Sunset*, the first two movies Willis made while he was moonlighting from some TV show, had kaputted spectacularly. Appropriately, Willis' performance in *Die Hard* is hungry and committed, redolent of a man visiting the Last Chance Saloon, and it worked handsomely, turning him into a bona fide megastar. What's more, his McClane — a likeable mix of working-stiff neuroses, desperate heroics and wise-guy sardonics — changed the face of action heroes forever.

One scene in particular sums up the impact Willis would have. McClane has narrowly escaped a gunfight and holes up in a bathroom to remove shards of jagged glass from his shredded feet. As he does so, McClane has a heartfelt back-and-forth with Reginald VelJohnson's Al Powell, an LA flatfoot with whom he has forged a brotherly connection over a walkie-talkie. As their dialogue exchange continues, McClane — alone, badly injured and afraid — breaks down and starts sobbing.

Prior to that moment, action heroes would barely crack a smile, let alone squirt a few. Can you imagine Dirty Harry sobbing about his missus? And yet in Willis, audiences were confronted with a recognisably vulnerable hero who didn't have all the answers, who didn't laugh — or stoically squint — in the face of danger or death. Sure, he cracked wise, but his humour felt organic, a defence



**"HANS GRUBER IS POSSIBLY THE FINEST SCREEN VILLAIN SINCE ONE MR D VADER MADE ASTHMA SEEM COOL."**



Yippie-ki-yay! Bruce Willis refashions the action hero in *Die Hard*.

mechanism to keep him sane. Here was a hero who made Arnie and his muscle-bound ilk seem antiquated.

Yet the real hero of *Die Hard* is McTiernan, who was given the gig by Sliver after impressing on 1987's *Predator*. But he didn't simply recreate *Predator*'s bludgeoning style, readjusting his approach to factor in not only the very different leading man, but also the differing landscape — from real jungle to urban jungle — while his collaboration with cinematographer Jan de Bont ensured the camerawork was lean, sleek and propulsive, with triangular camera movements recurring during action sequences, brilliantly establishing spatial relations in a single shot.

There's also substance married to the surface flash. There are obvious parallels with Westerns (McClane compares himself to Roy Rogers; John Wayne and Gary Cooper are namechecked) and 'Nam movies (under-equipped local takes on technologically advanced invaders; although, in this revisionist take, an American wins), but *Die Hard* is also a subtle satire on bureaucracy and corporations. Gruber and his men are terrorists, but they dress and act like city bankers, while McClane is dogged by trumped-up pen pushers, from William Atherton's venal newsman, to Hart Bochner's coked-up exec, Ellis, to the too-cocky FBI agents, Johnson and Johnson.

Needless to say, each of them gets their comeuppance, for *Die Hard* is a movie that allows each of its ordinary Joes to redeem themselves through violence. Not only does McClane save his marriage after toe-tagging ten terrorists, but the movie offers VelJohnson's Powell a literal shot at salvation, as the gun-shy desk jockey blows away Alexander Godunov's barking mad Karl. It's probable that McTiernan was here tipping a wink to the Hong Kong action movies of directors like John Woo. Ironically, of course, Woo would go on to borrow from *Die Hard* for his own masterpiece, *Hard Boiled* — but then again, there aren't many action movies since 1988 that haven't cribbed in some way from McTiernan's explosive marvel. Think of the *Die Hard*s on a bus/plane/train/boat/in a phone booth knock-offs you've seen — some great, some good, some utterly incompetent. However, like John Carpenter's *Halloween*, the original remains the best, towering above its imitators, rather like the Fox Plaza above the Century City skyline. **CHRIS HEWITT**

# The Cook, The Thief, His Wife And Her Lover

## Hell's kitchen

**1989** / CERT **18** / DIRECTOR **PETER GREENAWAY** / SCREENWRITER **PETER GREENAWAY** / CAST **RICHARD BOHRINGER, MICHAEL GAMBON, HELEN MIRREN**

IT WAS THE worst of times. It was the even worse than that of times. Frankly, it was the '80s: the decade that taste didn't so much forget as run away from, screaming like a banshee. It was also, conventional wisdom has it anyway, a decade virulently hostile to the arts, particularly in Margaret Thatcher's Britain. Savage funding cuts combined with militant neoconservative philistinism, which maintained that anything was as good as anything else, money being the great leveller, prompting declarations by Conservative Party member Norman Tebbit that *The Sun*'s "Page Three [topless model] is the working man's Venus de Milo!" (No, Norm, actually the Venus de Milo is the working man's Venus de Milo). The Thatcherite death-grip applied to "elitist" intellectual pursuits.

Times as stupid as these clearly needed villains to match. In Hollywood Michael Douglas would crystallise all that was stinking down in Manhattan's nether regions with his speechifying master of the universe, Gordon Gekko. But in the UK, the rampant cult of the self that was being worshipped was embodied in two very different, less smooth-edged malefactors. If *The Long Good Friday*'s Harold Shand effectively undercut the Thatcherite ideal of the "self-starting entrepreneur" (for which read "overreaching gangster"), Peter Greenaway and Michael Gambon — who gazed in mesmerised horror at the sheer lack of restraint, decorum or simple good taste that had become the '80s key trademark — fashioned in thuggish wannabe gourmand Albert Spica one of the most thrillingly vile creatures conceived for the screen in any decade.

As Gambon would later put it: "[Spica] covers everything around him with his slime and his excrement in the most appalling, horrible way. He's an anti-Semite, fascist, sexist, racist pig who bullies women and tortures children. He has no redeeming features whatsoever."

The big surprise, though, is that a character as vividly sketched as Spica should turn up in a Greenaway movie in the first place, and that he should be enmeshed in something as conventional as a linear plot. Greenaway, an ex-director/editor for the Central Office Of Information (the defunct UK government department that warned of the dangers of unmoored rugs and of climbing inside fridges) and one of British cinema's few genuine auteurs, had always been avowedly anti-narrative ("If you want to tell stories be a writer, not a filmmaker," he once sniffed), and suspicious of the conventional performances that such storytelling demanded from actors. Thus his early experimental shorts and later feature films tended to be organised around lists, catalogues, alphabets and other taxonomies: the numerical structure of *Drowning By Numbers* — one to 100 — being pretty typical of his strategy.

But with *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife And Her Lover* he was obviously enraged enough to at least mute his familiar formalism (though not entirely: the film takes place over a number of blow-outs, each introduced by a still shot of their menus) in the service of a traditional, easily accessible tale of spousal betrayal and bloody revenge. This time he had something urgent to say, and he wanted people to listen. The action takes place in Le Hollandais, a posh restaurant run by The Cook (a thickly accented Richard Bohringer) which is attended nightly by The Thief and his belching henchmen. During one of his nightly tirades ("I think those Ethiopians enjoy starving. Keeps them thin and graceful!"), his wife's (Helen Mirren) eye is caught by a diffident intellectual type reading at a table nearby (Alan Howard). An affair as unwise as it is torrid ensues, involving much disrobing in various parts of the restaurant. It is predictable that when they are discovered, Spica's reaction is a triumph of symbolic sadism.



**"WITH JUST DESERTS NOWHERE IN SIGHT, IT'S AS SUCCULENTLY RELEVANT NOW AS EVER."**

Michael Gambon's Thief steels his stomach while tucking into the tummy of the Lover (probably not Alan Howard).

Greenaway and regular cinematographer Sacha Vierny's camera glides in long, uninterrupted tracking shots between the opulent red and gold restaurant, the steamy, copper-filled kitchen (which is equipped, eccentrically enough, with that most desirable of culinary accessories, a warbling boy soprano), the wind- and smoke-swept car park with its lorries of decaying food, and the stark, white-tiled bathroom; these motions, Greenaway gleefully suggests, mimicking the movement of food through the digestive tract — first forkful to final flush. In one of the film's most elegant design elements, the costumes (the work of Jean-Paul Gaultier), the sashes and shirts of the thugs, Mirren's dress, even her cigarettes change colours, chameleon-like, with the sets. Michael Nyman's modishly minimalist score, often staccato and insistent, sometimes keening and sad, is, as usual, perfectly judged.

But it is not with his lush, often rot-filled visuals or Nyman's music but with the character of Spica that Greenaway expresses his real, venomous disdain for the age. A garrulous, violent vulgarian whose treatment of his wife in restaurants would shame Charles Saatchi, he is one of the great monsters of cinema — and one bound to be a revelation to a generation for whom Gambon is better known as Harry Potter's kindly headmaster. It would, of course, be nice to say that Greenaway's film is a reminder of grim times long gone, but in a new world of financial giant squids and Russian oligarchs and where the managers of hedge funds with strident monickers like Galleon, to quote one of *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife And Her Lover*'s brutal visual metaphors, piss all over us, and where just deserts seem nowhere in sight, Greenaway's original kitchen nightmare is as succulently relevant now as it ever was.

**ADAM SMITH**

# Do The Right Thing

**Spike Lee's trash-can-through-the-window of indie cinema still fights the power...**

**1989** / CERT **18** / DIRECTOR **SPIKE LEE** / SCREENWRITER **SPIKE LEE** / CAST **DANNY AIELLO, OSSIE DAVIS, RUBY DEE**

THERE'S A PIVOTAL scene in Spike Lee's 1989 joint that illustrates how absurd racism can really be. Pressured to discuss his favourite entertainers, racist Italian-American pizza store boss Pino (John Turturro) confesses to his black delivery boy Mookie (Spike Lee) that his pop heroes are Eddie Murphy, Prince and Magic Johnson. When Mookie points out that they're all black, Pino stumbles in his justification. "It's different," he protests. "Magic, Eddie, Prince are not niggers... they're not really black; they're more than black." Mookie's reply is classic Lee. "Pino," he deadpans, "deep down inside, don't you wish you were black?"

Twenty-six years after *Do The Right Thing* landed like a trash can through the store window of America's race complacency, it's tempting to hold the movie up as a dirty mirror to an age in which "urban" culture is more popular than ever with white people, and black stereotypes — from aspirational movie pimps to bejewelled rappers — service the vicarious desires of the lucrative middle-class cracker dollar. Has anything really changed, or are they, as Malcolm X might have suggested, little more than "house negroes": all-singin', all-dancin' showmen afforded the bling life via the patronage of white audiences who enjoy them from a safe distance as multimedia cartoons?

The reality is more complex, of course, and Spike Lee was smart enough to know how to play the game. Already a celebrity himself by 1988 — thanks to a series of popular Nike Air commercials with superstar Michael Jordan — the 32-year-old director and professional big mouth used the funding of a major studio (Universal, after Paramount baulked at the script) to make a film he knew would court the controversy necessary to turn it into a cultural phenomenon.

Set over the course of one long, sweltering summer's day in the Brooklyn suburb of Bedford-Stuyvesant, *Do The Right Thing* begins with local radio DJ Senor Love Daddy (Samuel L Jackson) exhorting the neighbourhood — and with it, the audience — to "Waaaaaake uuuuup!", his voice presiding over the film like a theatrical conscience. His forecast: the day is gonna be HOT and the colour is BLACK. As the mercury rises, so too does the tension amongst the blacks, whites, Puerto Ricans, Koreans and Italians uneasily sharing the block. "We were trying to depict realistically what I felt were the state of race relations in the United States in 1988," said Lee, and the film functions as microcosm of this precarious balance.

Trouble escalates when Buggin' Out (Giancarlo Esposito) calls for a boycott of Sal's Famous Pizzeria, a neighbourhood institution whose eponymous owner (Danny Aiello) insists on displaying only Italian-American icons on the restaurant wall — despite the fact that all of his customers are black. Meanwhile, the imposing Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn) stomps the pavement blasting the movie's anthem, Public Enemy's *Fight The Power*, at ear-shattering volume on his monolithic boom box, and brandishing gold knuckle rings that read "Love" and Hate"; late '80s B-boy culture by way of Robert Mitchum. Raheem's "jungle music" drives Sal and his son Pino over the edge. "You black cocksucker," he screams, "I'll fuckin' tear your nigger ass apart!" Raheem's ensuing death at the hands of overzealous cops — complete with his Air Jordans flapping like dying fish; some canny Lee product placement — is the spark that ignites the film's infamous climax. Shaken from his placid state, Mookie — and thus, Lee — tosses a trash can through the window of Sal's store, inciting a riot that ends in fiery destruction.



Did Mookie "do the right thing"? Was that even a relevant question? Some critics were hysterically vocal in their outrage at the time, accusing Lee of an inflammatory call to violence and shocked at what they saw as an act of senseless vandalism. Lee was typically unrepentant in defence. "The title does not really refer to Mookie throwing the garbage can through the window," he shot back. "My experience since this film's come out is that the white audience, they're more concerned

**"IT'S LOST NONE OF ITS EXPLOSIVE NATURE — IN AN ERA OF CULTURAL COMPLACENCY, IT STILL SOUNDS A WAKE-UP CALL."**

Director and star Spike Lee as pizza delivery man Mookie with Danny Aiello's Sal.

with the destruction of property, of Sal's Famous Pizzeria, than they were about the death of Radio Raheem."

What those critics failed to see is that *Do The Right Thing* is as much a plea for tolerance as a call to arms. Lee certainly wasn't naive: the film ends with juxtaposed quotes — one from Martin Luther King Jr, advocating peace, the other from Malcolm X (who Lee would later mythologise by biopic), favouring militant action. "We just go after the truth," said Lee of the film upon its release, "more than being concerned whether it's positive or negative."

If *Do The Right Thing* sounds like righteous soap-boxing in theory, the film itself is anything but. Lee matches his didactic yapping with a style both accomplished and infectious. The film pops and weaves with the exuberance of its slippery jazz score; soaked in an almost Technicolor unreality, it's a heightened fever dream-turned-nightmare, infused with the confrontational baiting of Godard and the irrepressible vigour of early Scorsese (who Lee counts among his cinema idols). In one bravura montage, characters sling racist epithets to camera in a crude symphony of crossfire.

The critical arm-flailing that followed worked like a charm for the film, and Lee had a hit on his hands. Controversy meant great publicity. When *Do The Right Thing* failed to win the Palme d'Or at Cannes — as Lee was convinced it would — the outspoken auteur cried robbery.

If that all seemed like empty bitterness, Lee could be rightfully annoyed that the film failed to receive an Oscar nomination for Best Film — especially when the award went to *Driving Miss Daisy*, where a rich white lady patronises a caricature black man (Morgan Freeman).

Today, Lee's film might seem almost simplistic in its manifesto, and yet it's lost none of its explosive nature; in an era of cultural complacency, it still sounds a wake-up call.

"That garbage can was heavy," Lee recalls of that scene. "In fact, the first two or three attempts to throw the garbage can through the window, it just bounced off." Maybe it'll take him a little longer to fight the power, after all. **LUKE GOODSELL**

# Sex, Lies, And Videotape

## Steven Soderbergh's classic debut

**1989** / CERT **18** / DIRECTOR **STEVEN SODERBERGH** / SCREENWRITER **STEVEN SODERBERGH** / CAST **JAMES SPADER, ANDIE MACDOWELL, PETER GALLAGHER**

"SEXY AND SHOCKING, it's our first contemporary five-star movie," bellowed *Empire*'s review for *Sex, Lies, And Videotape* way, way back in our third issue. In many respects it is the polar opposite of the magazine's first theatrical five-star film, a reissue of *Lawrence Of Arabia*. Compared to David Lean's 228-minute, $15 million (in 1962!) epic, Steven Soderbergh's debut is teeny-tiny, written in eight days, shot in five weeks for a meagre $1.2 million with a cast of nine. Yet for a film so quiet, it couldn't have made more noise on release, changing the indie landscape overnight, birthing the career of one of the most interesting directors of our lifetime and gifting the culture a touchstone title, loved by gossip headline writers and comedy TV shows (*The Simpsons*' 'Sex, Pies And Idiot Scrapes' wins best pun).

At the end of the high-concept '80s, *Sex, Lies*' premise couldn't be more low-concept '70s: in Baton Rouge (Soderbergh's hometown), the lives of repressed housewife Ann (Andie MacDowell) and her alpha-yuppie husband John (Peter Gallagher), who is having an affair with Ann's highly sexed sister Cynthia (Laura San Giacomo), are shaken up by the arrival of John's weirdo college roomie, Graham (James Spader), and the videotapes he has made detailing the sexual secrets of women. Inevitably, both sisters end up before Graham's camera, and the ramifications are shattering.

In other hands, this might have been laughably camp or insufferably pretentious. Instead, the newbie director and his cast nail a tone that is cerebral but sexy, witty but real, detached yet intimate. If Soderbergh's unique directorial voice is astonishing, so is his gift with a diverse ensemble. Gallagher gives top-quality boor, San Giacomo is feisty, funny and hot as hell, while former Brat Packer Spader, who won Best Actor at Cannes as the (literally) impotent truth-grenade, treads a fine line between weakling self-disgust and fierce, insinuating intelligence. Yet — and this isn't a phrase you've heard much since 1989 — this is Andie MacDowell's movie. Best known at the time for being overdubbed by Glenn Close in Tarzan flop *Greystoke: The Legend Of Tarzan, Lord Of The Apes*, she is a revelation, funny in the opening scenes with her shrink, empowered as she finally turns the tables on Graham. Any heart that *Sex, Lies* has comes from MacDowell — she deepens the movie in a stroke.

At the time, *Empire*'s reviewer, Wendy Bristow, wrote that *Sex, Lies*' pre-occupations — infidelity, masturbation, voyeurism — were given a "kinky new twist via the intrusion of '80s technology". As we've moved from the Camcorder Age to the Camera Phone Age, Soderbergh's film is looking both quaint (man, that camcorder is big) and increasingly clairvoyant, predicting the increasing role flat screens (sex tapes, PornHub, sexting, Tinder) play in modern erotic lives. In 1989, the idea of women talking dirty to camera was considered outrageous. These days, you can find it all over the internet.

Early in its gestation, Soderbergh had a list of eight — mainly terrible — monikers: *46:02* (the length of Ann's tape), *Retinal Retention*, *Charged Coupling Device* and — it gets worse — *Mode: Visual*. Like the title, *Sex, Lies, And Videotape* (which appears entirely in lower-case on the poster because Soderbergh felt it looked better) drip-feeds its bombshells in teasing steps. Naysayers decry the film as stagey — asked if Chekhov was an inspiration, Soderbergh instantly thought of *Star Trek*, not Anton — but it is cinematic in editing and structure: he creates tension by withholding the revelations of Ann's tape. And however dialogue-heavy it gets, *Sex, Lies* never feels slow, punctuated by Cliff Martinez' score, spiky then ambient.



Revisiting *Sex, Lies And Videotape* in the wake of Soderbergh's later career, it is surprising how stylistically un-jazzy it is, showing little of the flash of a *Traffic* or an *Ocean's* flick. There is the odd show-off moment reserved for San Giacomo's Cynthia — her orgasm is covered in a dolly zoom *à la Jaws*, a snaking camera following her naked feet ripped straight from the Coens' *Blood Simple* — but Soderbergh's style is reserved and refined, often slowly arcing the camera around Ann and Graham to suggest unease, or people uncomfortable

**"NAILS A TONE THAT IS CEREBRAL BUT SEXY, WITTY BUT REAL, DETACHED YET INTIMATE."**

It's her movie: Andie MacDowell gets videotapey as Ann.

in their own skin.

*Empire*'s '89 review compares Soderbergh to a "young Woody Allen", yet unlike Allen, the director's subsequent CV doesn't dwell on sexual politics. The then 26-year-old director took the Palme d'Or at Cannes — the same festival *Empire* launch editor Barry McIlheney pounded the Croisette hawking a new British movie magazine — quipping, "It's all downhill from here" (McIlheney probably thought the same), but didn't really hit his stride until nearly a decade later. After weird biopic *Kafka*, charming kids' flick *King Of The Hill*, underrated thriller *The Underneath* and the batshit crazy *Schizopolis*, it took 1998's *Out Of Sight* for Soderbergh to discover his creative and commercial coherence again.

If *Sex, Lies, And Videotape* had a delayed effect on Soderbergh's career, its impact on the nascent indie scene was immediate. It became the first credible, breakout winner at Sundance — then the "Utah/US Film Festival" — putting Robert Redford's event on the map. Before QT, it cemented navel-gazing dramas as the indie genre of choice and paved the way for the likes of Alexander Payne, Noah Baumbach and the 'mumblecore' movement. It's also the film that emboldened Miramax, ushering in a new era in promoting low-budget cinema. The Weinsteins spent double the film's $1.2 million budget on marketing, and it worked — it beat *A Nightmare On Elm Street V*, *Halloween V* and *Henry V* in the US and earned 30 times its budget globally. In *Down And Dirty Pictures*, Peter Biskind called it "the big bang of the modern indie movie". Ironic for a film about a man who can't get it up. **IAN FREER**

# When Harry Met Sally

## We're still having what they're having



**1989** / CERT **15** / DIRECTOR **ROB REINER** / SCREENWRITER **NORA EPHRON** / CAST **BILLY CRYSTAL, MEG RYAN, CARRIE FISHER, BRUNO KIRBY**

UNCLE HAL, BEING so very rich and suddenly, sadly, so very dead, could have ruined it all. Uncle Hal was a man of vast, Scrooge McDuckian wealth but no children, meaning that upon his passing, his staggering riches would go to his next closest relatives, his four nieces. This good fortune meant the eldest could give up writing her screenplay — which, she conceded, "would probably never get made" — and dedicate her time to lunching, hiring help and buying large things she didn't yet own. And this she would have done gladly, had it not turned out that some regrettable business in Puerto Rico had left Uncle Hal only quite comfortable, bequeathing the eldest just enough to buy a very nice car. So that eldest niece, Nora Ephron, carried right on and finished her script. Fortunately for us all, *When Harry Met Sally* did get made. It also made Ephron very rich, anyway.

*When Harry Met Sally* is one of a very small group of unimprovable romantic comedies, a genre so systematically abused that the mere term has practically become a pejorative. Since the early '90s — and we can't help but feel this is somehow the fault of Julia Roberts for being more charismatic than all her leading men — most romantic comedies have had almost nothing to do with romance.

They're a Valentine-cookie version of romance: cheap, sickly and unlikely to last the week. They've become, generally, not about couples but about one woman actively hunting for love, often being self-obsessed and shallow about it, to boot. She cries on someone sassy and then, after one-to-three dates, falls madly for some bland assemblage of Perfect Man clichés, for a period of the noughties usually shaped like Matthew McConaughey.

These films are embarrassingly far from the likes of *The Philadelphia Story*, *Bringing Up Baby*, *It Happened One Night* and — the romantic comedy against which all others must be judged and considered to have come up short — *His Girl Friday*. Films in which two strong-willed, complicated people are smashed together and trade wit until, eventually, they fall into each other's arms to have what we must assume will be fantastic, quippy sex. These are films where you could remove either of the romantic protagonists and still have a pretty engaging movie.

*When Harry Met Sally* has that DNA, but it sets itself a tough task even those movies didn't dare. All the previously mentioned classics largely derive their comedy from the soon-to-

**"DIALOGUE RINGS GLORIOUSLY TRUE: THERE'S BARELY A WASTED SYLLABLE."**



Sally (Meg Ryan) and Harry (Billy Crystal) enjoy a spicy sandwich.

be couple broadly detesting each other's company. Taking people from hate to love offers up rich opportunity for spitting barbs before swapping spit. *When Harry Met Sally* asks itself the question, "Can men and women ever really be friends?" Friendship? It's the least cinematically promising relationship available; there's more possibility in asking if man and dog can ever be roommates. Friendships are nice but they're not even subplots. They are not rich in stimulating event. Fortunately, though, the friendship presented here was devised by two people with great experience of being man/woman friends — and is very entertaining.

Director Rob Reiner and Ephron had been pals for years, with no stated incidences of intimacy, when they discussed making the film, some time in 1984. Over one of many lunches, they debated a film that would ask that question and present a couple who were equal in intelligence and romantic neuroses, a balance Reiner felt had been off in his films, where men had tended to be the more buffoonish in any couple. And it's that balance that makes the film the rare romantic comedy that has plenty for both sexes. Because it's not about romance; at least, not that emetic, string-quartet, oh-look-it's-snowing masquerade of romance you get in *27 Dresses* or *Love Actually*. It's about two people, two whole people. They're so individually spectacular that you love each of them powerfully and, therefore, naturally want them to be together, because their union will, it's clear, be more than the sum of its parts.

There isn't a scene in the whole film that doesn't have at least one line worthy of repeat. There's barely a wasted syllable. Much of the dialogue came from actual conversations that Ephron had with Reiner about his newly single life (interspersed with many offerings from Billy Crystal, who was Reiner's best friend at the time, to the extent that the split-screen bedtime-TV-watching Harry and Sally enjoy was inspired by the two men's own routine). It's why it all rings so gloriously true. We can all recognise something of ourselves — albeit a smarter version, who doesn't think of the perfect line 45 minutes after the event — and that is, to a degree, what all the best films possess.

Of course, *When Harry Met Sally* does, to some extent, cheat itself. The answer to the movie's tagline question is, as evidenced by its writer and director, "Yes, men and women can be just friends." The original intention was for Harry and Sally to continue as chums, as that was the most realistic outcome. But as much truth as there is in the movie, it is still a movie. Whatever they say, almost nobody goes to the cinema looking for the brutal truth of real life, so a lack of a happy ending would have been too much to bear.

At the time of release, *When Harry Met Sally* was generally well received and even nominated for an Oscar, for screenwriting, which it lost to *Dead Poets Society*, a theft which should make everyone glance about in embarrassment. That neither Billy Crystal nor Meg Ryan were nominated is compensated for by the fact these will always be the roles for which they will be remembered.

It's only in the years since that the film has grown into an indisputable classic of its genre. But, as the movie illustrates, it can take a ridiculously long time before you realise something is perfect just as it is. **OLLY RICHARDS**



Tommy DeVito (Joe Pesci) saying something to amuse Henry Hill (Ray Liotta) and Mikey Franzese (Joseph Bono).

# GoodFellas

## Gangland, cruelty and capitalism: Scorsese's magnificent mobster mayhem

**1990** / CERT **18** / DIRECTOR **MARTIN SCORSESE** / SCREENWRITERS **MARTIN SCORSESE, NICHOLAS PILEGGI** / CAST **ROBERT DE NIRO, RAY LIOTTA, JOE PESCI**

IT'S ABOUT VIOLENCE. It's about drugs. It's about money. Most of all, *GoodFellas* is about greed. A throwaway line in the closing sequence addresses the theme: as the Feds round up those ratted-out by Henry Hill (Ray Liotta), a Mob foot-soldier snarls, "How about you guys go down to Wall Street and get some real fuckin' crooks?" Martin Scorsese would address the moral degeneracy of white-collar criminals with *The Wolf Of Wall Street*, but he'd already explored the boom 'n' bust lifestyle. As he commented upon the picture's release, "In organised crime, the idea is not to go around killing people; it's to make a lot of money for the least amount of effort." Sound familiar?

*GoodFellas* may be set largely in the '60s and '70s, but it's energised by the excess of the 'Me Generation' decade — red braces, cocaine and conspicuous consumption. Upon its autumn 1990 release, America was in recession. Hill exalts in the boom and lives on the never-never. It's spectacular and satisfying, but whatever you buy now, eventually you have to pay for.

Of course, the Mob as metaphor for corporate life is nothing new. The *Godfather* films are a parable for the tainted American Dream. But if Coppola's is an operatic opus, Scorsese's is an excoriating exposé. As easy — and comforting — as it is to forget, this story is true. Written by Scorsese and crime reporter Nicholas Pileggi, based on the latter's book *Wise Guy: Life In A Mafia Family*, it adheres horribly closely to the life of crook-turned-informer Hill — a point underscored by the date-specific captions that appear throughout. No director is as well set as Scorsese to tell the story, who couples virtuoso technique with a can't-be-faked familiarity with the personalities on display. *Mean Streets* understood the grubby existence of small-time hoods, the street-level hustle informed by the director's upbringing in Little Italy, New York. Nearly 30 years later, this is a sequel of sorts: slick but sick and relentlessly, ruthlessly clear-eyed. Scorsese had just dealt with doubt, redemption and divinity in *The Last Temptation Of Christ*. Having explored the saviour, he focused on Satan and a testament to the truth of what Paul tells Timothy in the Bible: "The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil."

The opening — with Billy Batts (Frank Vincent) gasping in a car boot, then knifed by pint-sized psycho Tommy DeVito (Joe Pesci) — is deliberately horrifying, a warning: don't be charmed by these guys. Henry, Tommy and Jimmy 'The Gent' Conway (Robert De Niro) are stained red by the brake-lights; there might as well be a sign that reads, "Welcome to Hades". Quickly, though, style and exuberance overpower fear and self-loathing. You can't help but be beguiled as the camera dollies in, the frame freezes and Hill's voiceover intones those immortal words: "As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a gangster." Brass blares. Tony Bennett sings out. The seduction begins.

As the young Henry (Christopher Serrone) is drawn into this world, so are we: no school, free cigarettes, tough guys treating you like a man; who wouldn't want to be a goodfella? Nowhere is this better exemplified than in the Copacabana tracking shot — perhaps the most celebrated of '90s cinema — as Henry squires the sceptical Karen (Lorraine Bracco) into the club, skipping the queue, weaving through the runarounds, the kitchen, right to the front of the stage, where a table instantly appears for them. Technically

**"SCORSESE'S FILM IS AN EXCORIATING EXPOSÉ... SLICK BUT SICK AND RELENTLESSLY, RUTHLESSLY CLEAR-EYED."**

it's astonishing, but imitators would do well to remember that it serves a purpose beyond stylistic showboating: it nails a narrative point. As Paul Sorvino (heavy-lidded don Paulie) once said, "We find them absolutely impossible to resist, because they can do, it seems, whatever they want to do." Life without rules: amoral, hedonistic, glorious. When Henry pistol-whips a preppy prick who has roughed up Karen — and Liotta is brilliant here, bristling with rage — it's hard not to grin. It's easy to understand her thoughts, in voiceover: "I know there are women, like my best friends, who would have gotten out of there the minute their boyfriend gave them a gun to hide. But I didn't. I gotta admit the truth: it turned me on."

Even when evil becomes ever more apparent, as Jimmy offs everyone involved in the Lufthansa heist — the shots timed to the licks of Clapton's *Layla,* which was played on set — the style is astonishing, enveloping, opening Scorsese up to accusations of glamorising gangsters. It probably explains why he lost out to Kevin Costner and the more stately *Dances With Wolves* at the Oscars. But the genius of the movie is that it takes no obvious moral view — it doesn't judge: it stands back and lets you draw your own conclusions. And these change with each viewing, at each age. Watch it once, young enough, and it's the visual razzamatazz and profane or pseudo-wise one-liners that linger: "What am I? A schmuck on wheels?" "Never rat on your friends and always keep your mouth shut."

Watch it again, and the focus shifts to curdled love and relationships gone awry. There are wonderful, intimate moments that speak to a lifetime of being together — as when Henry teases Tommy during the restaurant arson, "You need help reaching anything?" — and gut-crunching beats of betrayal, as when a suited and spectacled Jimmy faces Henry over a café table and our anti-hero knows his days are numbered. Yes, it's a crime film, but it's more than that: it's about misplaced power, desire, gluttony, insatiable ambition and being let down. The ending still surprises, as Henry steps from the witness stand and speaks directly to you. Facing the reality of life without "the life", he's an empty, hollowed-out figure, full of regret — but not necessarily for the right reasons. "We were treated like movie stars with muscle," he says, fondly. "Today, everything is different. There's no action. I have to wait around like everyone else..." Caught between suburbia and Satan, he's lost. **NEV PIERCE**



Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner) seeks the truth.

# JFK

## Rolling Stone

**1991** / CERT **15** / DIRECTOR **OLIVER STONE** / SCREENWRITERS **OLIVER STONE, ZACHARY SKLAR** / CAST **KEVIN COSTNER, GARY OLDMAN, JACK LEMMON**

WHO SHOT JFK? The glib answer, of course, is Robert Richardson, the legendary cinematographer. Boom boom, here all week. The real answer, of course, is that we'll probably never know for sure. Oliver Stone, and his masterful conspiracy drama-cum-courtroom thriller, is convinced it wasn't Lee Harvey Oswald, but instead a group of highly trained, government-sponsored shooters who blew into Dallas, blew out the President's brains, then blew out of town again.

Whether or not you believe Stone's theory, in which the CIA and the Mafia and a group of Communists, enraged about Cuba, Vietnam and, well, just about everything, decided to have him dealt with, there's little doubt that his extraordinary three-hour (nearer four, if you watch the director's cut) epic presents it in an exhilarating blitzkrieg of information. It's compelling, it's persuasive, it's conspiracy theory as pure cinema, with Richardson's stunning use of multiple film stocks and lighting techniques — which the duo would use again on *Natural Born Killers* just three years later — racing to keep up with the barrage of facts and figures, theories and counter-theories that Stone and his co-writer, Zachary Sklar, and his editors, Joe Hutshing and Pietro Scalia, lob at the audience. Nowhere more thrillingly than the lengthy scene where Donald Sutherland's high-ranking army wonk, Mr X (since believed to be L Fletcher Prouty, the technical advisor on the movie), lays the conspiracy on a plate for Kevin Costner's Jim Garrison, the DA so affected by Kennedy's killing that he takes it upon himself to prosecute someone, anyone, and let justice be done, though the heavens fall.

Of course, Stone was dismissed as a left-wing nutjob with a hard-on for the hope, the idealism, the liberalism that Kennedy represented. There are those who say he doesn't present a convincing counter-argument, but that is not the job of a director, nor the point of cinema. And that feeling explains his decision to make the movie he made.

Unlike his later *Nixon*, which focused squarely on Richard Nixon, *JFK* is not about John Fitzgerald Kennedy. He could have made a simple biopic (it's not like Kennedy's life lacks incident), but it's hard to overestimate the impact Kennedy's assassination had on America, a place Stone clearly believes would ›

have been a better place had Jack been left alive. A teenager at the time, Stone's life itself would possibly have been irrevocably changed had the murder not occurred. Kennedy was reluctant to go to war in Vietnam, and chances are wouldn't have been drawn into that conflict; a conflict which ultimately involved a young soldier called Oliver Stone. (See *Platoon* on page 142.)

So it's perhaps inevitable that Stone was drawn to this story. *JFK*, the movie, is the ultimate distillation of the themes that had driven him throughout his career, from *Salvador* to *The Doors*, via *Platoon* and *Wall Street*. All of those had an anti-authoritarian streak a mile wide, and as Garrison bangs his head against obstacle after obstacle, and slowly pulls back the veil of conspiracy, it becomes clear that the overriding reason for getting rid of Kennedy can be summed up by another line from one of Stone's most famous movies. Greed *is* good.

What's remarkable about the movie is that anger courses through its veins, but never overpowers the picture. Stone knew that in order for his polemic to be presentable, it had to be palatable. One way of assuring this was an astonishing all-star cast. There are so many cameos and charismatic turns that the movie has something for everyone, whether it's Tommy Lee Jones' arch-camp as Clay Shaw/Bertrand, Gary Oldman's chameleonic channelling of Oswald, or high-intensity turns from John Candy, Joe Pesci and Kevin Bacon.

But Stone's masterstroke was to place Costner at its core. Costner was then the last great big-screen bastion of Americana, a blend of Jimmy Stewart, Gary Cooper and JFK himself, and he anchors the film as a truly decent man. The last 30 minutes of the movie, where Garrison presents his case to the public in a monologue that rivals Sutherland's for complexity of information, are riveting, and Costner has never been better. He wasn't nominated for an Oscar. Conspiracy?

Regardless of your feelings on Stone's politics, or Kennedy, or the cloud of claim and counter-claim surrounding his murder, *JFK* is a piece of bravura filmmaking by all concerned (John Williams' score is his best outside Spielberg and *Star Wars*). But it's Stone's movie, an astonishing achievement, the last truly great movie on his CV so far, almost as if the process of making it took a little piece of him with it. But then, as Garrison notes, telling the truth can be a scary thing sometimes. **CHRIS HEWITT**



# Terminator 2: Judgment Day

***"Hasta la vista*, baby!"**

**1991** / CERT **15** / DIRECTOR **JAMES CAMERON** / SCREENWRITERS **JAMES CAMERON, WILLIAM WISHER JR** / CAST **ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER, LINDA HAMILTON, EDWARD FURLONG**

WHEN DENNIS MUREN, Gene Warren Jr, Stan Winston and Robert Skotak bounded onto the stage to receive the Best Visual Effects Oscar for *Terminator 2*, it came as no surprise that Muren, the visual-effects supervisor at ILM, was grinning just a little wider than the other three. Using a combined three-and-a-half minutes of footage, his team had dropped a tactical nuke on the business of special effects, rewriting the rulebook with the film's malleable antagonist. Forget Helen of Troy: the T-1000's would be the face that launched a thousand ships, a million aliens and a park full of dinosaurs — and that was only the beginning.

Muren's shape-shifting wizardry triggered a surge of imitators, from *Star Trek* to Michael Jackson, all hitching their cart to ILM's morphing bandwagon. But if *T2*'s Swiss-army-foe had become the posterbot for CGI, it owed its very existence to a dripping tentacle in 1989's *The Abyss*. The 'pseudopod' sequence in James Cameron's previous film had taken nine months, lasted 75 seconds and proved that technology was almost



Arnie returns as the Terminator, and this time he'll make you cry.

catching up with the filmmaker's fevered imagination. It was, as Fox's Tom Sherak once bemoaned, as if the entire waterlogged debacle had been just a test reel for *Terminator 2*.

Not content with pinning the success of an entire production on experimental, largely unproven technology, though, Cameron also had to wrestle the rights away from a difficult production company (Hemdale) and an angry ex-wife (Gale Anne Hurd), convincing Carolco to dole out $5 million to each. With a budget of around $100 million, *Terminator 2* seems almost modest next to today's cash-snorting productions. Cameron himself would rack up more than that with *True Lies*, double it with *Titanic* and spend half that on carob bars while making *Avatar*. Back in 1991, with a price tag 15 times that of *The Terminator*, *T2* was the most expensive movie ever made.

If the CGI traced its ancestry to Cameron's *Abyss*, then the story he and co-writer William Wisher Jr came up with was all *Aliens*. Like his sequel to Ridley Scott's film, *T2* is an evolution as well as a continuation; in this case a chase movie writ large, with higher stakes, a graver threat and the simplest of desires (stay alive) replaced by one far grander (save the world). At its heart was a single stroke of genius. The Terminator, the cyborg that didn't know pity or remorse, that absolutely would not stop until you were dead, would become the hero. Arnold-as-saviour was the movie's secret weapon: an efficient, unstoppable killing machine... with a heart. But while the Tin Man is discovering how to love, Dorothy is busy field-stripping an M16. Like Ripley's transition from victim to vindicator, Linda Hamilton's Sarah Connor storms into *T2* as a Camel-chugging, steely-eyed soldier with sculpted musculature almost as impressive as Schwarzenegger's. As the machine is playing mummy, it's she, drained of compassion in black fatigues and dark glasses, who inhabits the role of mechanical killer.

Thirteen year-old Edward Furlong (pulled straight out of a Pasadena youth club) gives a raw, unhoned performance as the young John Connor, lending humanity's saviour a realism (complete with punchable obnoxious streak) Cameron had failed to find among the ranks of child actors he'd tested. The true discovery, though, was 32-year-old Robert Patrick, then living in his car and with only a goon in *Die Hard 2* to distinguish his CV. Millions of dollars and countless hours (one 15-second effects shot took ten days to process on an early-'90s render farm) would have been for nothing without a suitably menacing T-1000. Cameron's "Porsche" to the T-800's "Panzer tank", Patrick cuts a lean, athletic figure — all coiled power and deadly agility. Nowhere is the difference between the two models more pronounced than when Patrick sprints after the heroes' escaping car, bounding towards the fleeing vehicle like some kind of amped-up, homicidal cheetah. Prowling with a shark-like aspect, with dead eyes to match, Patrick's performance is as chilling as Schwarzenegger's original, making up in atavistic menace what he lacks in bodyweight. When the two first clash and it's Schwarzenegger who crashes head-first through a plate-glass window, it's the big guy who's outmatched.

Viewed now from a world in which CGI-heavy action sequels dominate the box office, *Terminator 2* manages to stand head and metal shoulders above them all. Cameron's forceful direction and flab-free writing give this two-and-a-half-hour runtime the feel of a movie half that length. The pell-mell chase through the canal-ways (complete with twirling Winchester 1887, a move Cameron cribbed from John Wayne in *Stagecoach*) would make a satisfying climax to any other movie; here it's just the appetiser. A masterfully tense prison break and subsequent flight flashes past in moments and, one bleeding Joe Morton later, we're into the Cyberdyne assault. A gleeful Schwarzenegger rains holy hell down on most of the LAPD with the minigun from *Predator* before breaking out a grenade launcher and leaving the entire building in flaming fragments. It's a pyrogasm of budget well-spent, and even this is merely a set-up for the grand finale. Those final 30 minutes, with their freeway chase, tanker crash and steel-mill showdown, are as fast and furious as any third act before or since — the fruits of a single, heroic sprint of screenwriting from Cameron.

**"TRIGGERED A SURGE OF IMITATORS, FROM *STAR TREK* TO MICHAEL JACKSON."**

But for all its kinetic pace and full-auto thrills, *Terminator 2* is a film which pulls at the heart just as it squeezes it. Like its star, this is a machine wrapped in human skin, and in its final moments it delivers on the promise Cameron made to Schwarzenegger as production began. "The ending is going to be like *Shane*," he had said. "We're going to get the audience to cry for you — the biggest, coldest, motherfucker machine bad-guy in history." As Sarah lowers the Terminator into molten steel and Brad Fiedel's haunting synth cries the eulogy, we're left as tear-streaked as the boy he leaves behind: just holding it together until that final upraised thumb. **JAMES DYER**

# Glengarry Glen Ross

## Is this the best ensemble ever assembled?

**1992** / CERT **15** / DIRECTOR **JAMES FOLEY** / SCREENWRITER **DAVID MAMET** / CAST **AL PACINO, JACK LEMMON, ALEC BALDWIN**

WHERE WOULD THE movies be without rain? Gene Kelly might famously have found himself happily singing and hoofing in it, but for the most part relentless precipitation is a harbinger of very bad celluloid juju. In James Foley's masterful film adaptation of David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*, it hammers on the windows of the offices of realtors Mitch & Murray, almost daring the desperate salesmen to venture into the drenching cold to pursue sales leads so dead they might as well be chiselled onto tombstones. But then, being inside on that particular night is no picnic in the park either.

Jack Lemmon was always one of cinema's finest actors, and Shelley 'The Machine' Levene is one of his best roles; AI Pacino is up there with Lemmon and he's in top form as silky smooth operator Ricky Roma, Levine's one-time protégé; Ed Harris, at the time one of the younger tyros, would become one of its great actors and he shows exactly why here; Kevin Spacey, while a familiar face in theatre, was then known to very few filmgoers; Alan Arkin had dazzled in *Catch-22*... you get the picture. If there's ever been a finer ensemble cast working, and this is the joy, so unselfishly with each other and at the height of their powers — well, answers on a postcard, please.

Many of the plaudits go, rightly, to Mamet's screenplay, adapted pretty faithfully from his Pulitzer-winning stage play (*Death Of A Fuckin' Salesman*, as the cast would come to refer to it). But James Foley's direction is also key to the film's relentless, restless power. Transforming stage plays to film without sacrificing either the original form's intimacy or, in this case, vital claustrophobia is a rare skill fraught with potential screw-ups (for an object lesson in how not to do it have a look at *Closer*). Either you open the movie up to the point where it bears little resemblance to the play, or you place a static camera at the front of the dress circle — negating the very point of the exercise. Foley negotiates the pitfalls expertly — even when he opens up the action and takes it out of the office, the locations and incessant rain keep the drama locked down. This is a film that takes place crammed into cars and phone booths, or slumped on the stools of empty bars late at night.

Cinematographer Juan Ruiz' subtly timed but dramatic camera moves and lighting design are elegant but punchy, notably in one of the film's most effective moments. Roma (Pacino) is seen bathed in the bordello-like rouge glow from a restaurant. It is the setting for a seduction; and as if to reinforce the intimacy of the moment the incessant rain beats on outside. After remarking that all train carriages smell mildly of shit, he delivers the following speech as a preamble to attempting to sell unsuspecting mark James Lingk (a beautifully edgy Jonathan Pryce, virginal and ripe for the taking) virtually worthless land parcels in Florida: "When you die you're going to regret the things you don't do. You think you're queer? I'm going to tell you something: we're all queer. You think you're a thief? So what? You get befuddled by a middle-class morality? Get shut of it. Shut it out. You cheat on your wife? You did it. Live with it. You fuck little girls, so be it." It's delivered with such serpentine charm and ruthless come-hither persuasion that you almost have to listen to it twice to get the extraordinary nihilism of what he's saying, and all in the service of a land deal. His victim is helpless in the face of the assault; at least, until the next day when his wife sends him scurrying back to undo the deal. (Women are the enemy throughout the film, entirely missing from this battle of male egos.)

Both Ed Harris and Alan Arkin manage to conjure different species of desperation: Harris a kind of inchoate rage at the unfairness of the world, while Arkin radiates a self-perpetuating misery at the salesman's equivalent of sexual impotence — an inability to close a deal. Spacey's role is possibly the most underwritten, apart from two deliciously icy sequences: the first (again in that drenching rain) in which he toys with Levine's hopelessness, and the second in which he finally destroys him. He has not much to do but play the office bastard, and he essays the role with the kind of sadistic relish he would later amalgamate with playfulness in *Swimming With Sharks*.

Mamet made a number of changes to his stage play while adapting it for the screen. The introduction of Alec



**"SOME CRITICS FOUND IT A NAKED ATTACK ON UNFETTERED CAPITALISM."**

Ricky Roma (Al Pacino) can't help you.

Baldwin's character Blake is the most obvious addition, the famous, "Fuck you, that's my name," sequence introduced to add a ticking clock to proceedings. (It is also, despite Baldwin's incendiary turn, the film's most unsatisfactory element. He and it exist entirely independently of the rest of the drama and seem to indicate that Mamet distrusted cinema audiences to engage with the characters without a further, more obvious, plot motor.) Another telling change is the omission of a final line in the stage play. In the film, Roma offers to work with Levine as Levine moves towards the office, the cops and his fate — it is a small gesture of friendship in a world notably without much human feeling. In the play, however, as Levine leaves the room, Roma reveals to the other characters that he was only interested in getting hold of a share of Levine's sales. Theatregoers were not denied even that moment of humanity.

Some critics found in *Glengarry Glen Ross* a naked attack on unfettered capitalism, and an element of that polemic is there. But there's more to it than a lecture about the dehumanisation of the market. It's about men and their work, and it is that universal experience that makes it such subtly discomforting viewing. Though all the players are in their way dramatic extremes, they contain elements recognisable to anyone who travails in the modern purgatory of the office: the has-been who was once great but can't admit his slide from grace; the star performer who, though he doesn't know it, will inevitably go the way of his former mentor; the abject failure who hangs on by his fingernails; and the man whose anger at the whole damn unfairness of the situation is kept in check by his cowardice — for now. As the rain beats down, Mamet slyly asks the question: which one are you? **ADAM SMITH**

# Groundhog Day

## Haven't we already done this one?

**1993** / CERT **PG** / DIRECTOR **HAROLD RAMIS** / SCREENWRITERS **DANNY RUBIN, HAROLD RAMIS** / CAST **BILL MURRAY, ANDIE MACDOWELL, CHRIS ELLIOTT**

DANNY RUBIN, CREATOR and co-writer of *Groundhog Day*, likes to joke about his plans to write a sequel. He would call it something like 'Groundhog Day II: Return To Punxsutawney', "Then we'd just re-release it." *Groundhog Day* is unrepeatable. It's the great post-war Hollywood comedy. How many other rom-coms try existentialism on for size? How many existentialist dramas feature Ned Ryerson? So much lies beyond the deadpan house style of Bill Murray, but the film is unthinkable without him as the weatherman cursed (or is it blessed?) with repeating 2 February, until... until... until... We're getting ahead of ourselves. Time to start again...

IT'S GROUNDHOG DAY! And we're off... off to Gobbler's Knob to meet Punxsutawney Phil, a pugnacious-looking rodent who can foretell the end of winter. They're a fine pair, Connors (Murray) and friend: hibernators, ground-dwellers, and weathermen named Phil with only a day to make their mark. Connors is in town (Woodstock, Illinois starring as apple-pie Punxsutawney) to report on the Groundhog ritual before hoofing it back to his untroubled soullessness. To fill time, he's falling in mild lust with his new producer, the sweet but sanctimonious Rita (Andie MacDowell), so far immune to his repeated pick-up attempts.

IT'S GROUNDHOG DAY! It's impossible to calculate how many identical-but-different Groundhog Days (and none of the film's days are actually the same) Connors endures. The film subdivides into what is effectively one long, sublime montage. For instance, does he attend doctor and shrink on the same day? That is, the same same day. During the project's development they debated how long he was trapped; Rubin thought in Methuselahean terms (10,000 years of monotonous woe) but that felt ungraspable, so it was pared down to the time it would take to perfect the piano. Five years? Ten? Here is the ultimate expression of film's ability to warp time.

Rubin's original "very existential" script was steered toward commercial waters by Harold Ramis. Rubin had started with Connors already cornered by time, bamboozling the audience as he resignedly predicts all that befalls him. Over several drafts, the establishing scenes were grafted on, then the romance with Rita: a clichéd before to set up the chronic after.

Similar themes have been explored before and since, both in literature — Beckett's surrealism (*Waiting For Groundhog*?) and Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* spring to mind — and in cinema: *It's A Wonderful Life*, *Sliding Doors*, *Run Lola Run*, everything by David Lynch. But officially, Rubin had only two inspirations: Nietzsche's philosophy and Anne Rice's *Interview With The Vampire* (for the drudgery of immortality). An early draft had Connors hexed by a local crone, but, crucially, Ramis opts never to reveal the mechanism of Connors' curse. It becomes a human crisis, and a high-concept film that satirises the idea of high-concept films. Confused? Let's start again.

IT'S GROUNDHOG DAY! Ramis and Rubin's brilliance is also that the film itself never repeats itself. Instead, it plays out in near musical movements made up of interlinked themes: seductions and gluttony, lawlessness and good deeds. Still with a three-act structure — a set of beginning-beginnings, middle-beginnings, and end-beginnings. Ryan Gilbey, in his exhaustive BFI Classic book, saw it as a fairy tale that keeps doubling back on itself: Once upon a time... Once upon a time... Once upon a time...

How many comedies chance a symphony of suicides? We even see Connors dead (not that it helps). Then Murray suggests his despair is untrustworthy. Has he only sampled the depths out of sheer boredom? In Connors, Murray elevates his sourpuss genius — that mocking, Nicholson-ish vibe, as if he alone can see how foolish films tend to be — into something romantic. The lonely vigil of being the only one to see the foolishness of life.

IT'S GROUNDHOG DAY! Is this a spiritual thing? Ramis received adoring letters from Christian ministers, rabbis and Buddhists alike. "I'm a god, not the God," Connors mulls sardonically... "I don't think." He does face the purgatorial challenge of Ned Ryerson. Stephen Tobolowsky's irksome,



**"SUBDIVIDES INTO WHAT IS EFFECTIVELY ONE LONG, SUBLIME MONTAGE."**

Bill Murray during the first of many Groundhog Days.

repeat-play insurance salesman is key. He warns us Punxsutawney could be the hellhole Connors thinks it is, with Ryerson its gasbagging Beelzebub. Tobolowsky had been so "overwhelmingly obnoxious" in the audition, Ramis hired him on the spot. Bing!

IT'S GROUNDHOG DAY! Here too is a film about filmmaking: the chance for different takes, improvisation and flourish. Connors has become the author of his own story and art just might save him. He learns jazz piano and French poetry with which to woo Rita. It's a discomforting sort of romance: he can fall in love, but for Rita it's always a first date. Boil it down further, and *Groundhog Day* is like a retold joke that gets funnier with the telling. The title has slipped into common parlance, a pejorative for the recycling of daily routine — life as a litany of Groundhog Days.

IT'S GROUNDHOG DAY! So how is it that Connors remedies his life on loop? He is set no greater challenge than to "stay ahead of the weather". Put simply, he becomes worthy of Rita's love by loving life. Leastways, he becomes worth sleeping with. If you're the half-full type, take heart. Accept the life you are trapped in and you might find peace. If you're more the half-empty variety, however, consider another reference. *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers* (1956) features a picturesque town full of chilling happiness, and one man can see through it all. Maybe Connors has become a pod person and this has been a horror movie all along... **IAN NATHAN**

# Pulp Fiction

## Where Quentin Tarantino became a genre unto himself

**1994** / CERT **18** / DIRECTOR **QUENTIN TARANTINO** / SCREENWRITER **QUENTIN TARANTINO** / CAST **JOHN TRAVOLTA, UMA THURMAN, SAMUEL L JACKSON**

"THE PATH OF the righteous man is beset on all sides by the inequities of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men. Blessed is he who, in the name of charity and goodwill, shepherds the weak through the valley of the darkness, for he is truly his brother's keeper and the finder of lost children. And I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who attempt to poison and destroy My brothers. And you will know I am the Lord when I lay My vengeance upon you."

Ezekiel 25:17 does not go down like the above passage, a Biblical rewrite made catch-phrase-worthy by a hit man with a Jheri curl, after sipping a tasty beverage. Still, most preachers can only fantasise about getting people as excited about proclaiming the word of God.

A generation of cinemagoers may be not accurately quoting a divine warning from an Old Testament prophet but the seismic implications of them thinking they are doing so is impossible to mistake. From the distinct quill of Quentin Tarantino — aided by long-time associate Roger Avary — the pre-murder speech of superfly killer Jules Winnfield (Samuel L Jackson) is just one of umpteen pervasive firecrackers rocketed into pop culture by insta-classic *Pulp Fiction*.

"Royale with cheese", "I'm sorry, did I break your concentration", "Bring out The Gimp" and, "Any time is a good time for pie" scratches the surface of *Pulp Fiction* patter which immediately permeated off screen; a phenomenal blurring of real and reel life. Much like Tarantino's potty-mouthed, violent and chronologically challenging opus itself.

An epochal love letter to — and deftly demented reworking of — the canon of cinematic coolness, Tarantino's second feature erupted in 1994. Swiftly, it went on to overshadow/define modern motion pictures. While contemporaries from Kevin Smith to Steven Soderbergh and Richard Linklater were also being hailed as the new American mavericks, Tarantino's razor-sharp style of homage and invention eclipsed his peers.

Lauded at Cannes, robbed at the Oscars (nominated for seven; only scored Best Original Screenplay for Tarantino and Avary), *Pulp Fiction* also pushed its instigator into hallowed territory where his name became its own genre.

Two years earlier, motormouth film geek Tarantino had made huge waves on the international silver screen with his blistering debut, heist redux *Reservoir Dogs*. Having sold his *Natural Born Killers* and *True Romance* screenplays to help with ponying up the dough to bankroll *Dogs*, Tarantino's unique form of movie magpie-ness impressively hit full stride when *Pulp Fiction* became fact. He would go on to forge and expand his signature approach to reinventing the artform he worships but the depth of winks, jabs and creativity is akin to fanboy perfection.

With his backstory already oft repeated like it was its own movie — a former video-store clerk who, rather than go to film school, watched EVERY FILM EVER as his education — Tarantino's sources of inspiration for *Pulp Fiction* hardly knew boundaries. A hardcore fan of Elmore Leonard's prose (and ability to turn mundane chatter into transcendent art), Tarantino's kaleidoscope of gangster, crime, noir and Blaxploitation flicks confidently strived to subvert genre conventions.

Launching from a synopsis Avary conceived about a boxer refusing to throw a fight, Tarantino spent three months writing in Amsterdam after his global *Dogs* duties. While Bruce Willis — one of *Pulp Fiction*'s revelatory A-list stars — during production described Tarantino as "the modern Charles Dickens" because "Dickens wrote about regular people" with a heightened sophistication, TriStar wasn't as convicted. Having funded Tarantino's scripting, the Hollywood studio baulked at the procession of "dark" and "harrowing" sequences. Despite the auteur's protestations about *Pulp Fiction* being a comedy, TriStar passed.

Miramax had distributed *Dogs* and, being the indie powerhouse of the time, promptly pounced on *Pulp Fiction*. Assembling a cast comprised of several cult or vintage actors (after *Dogs* premiered at Sundance, Tarantino talked with Travolta and Jackson about working together one day), the multi-faceted page-turner he eventually



**"AN EPOCHAL LOVE LETTER TO THE CANON OF CINEMATIC COOLNESS."**



Vincent Vega (John Travolta) and Mrs Mia Wallace (Uma Thurman) bust some moves at Jack Rabbit Slim's.

unveiled more than vindicated Miramax's investment.

Despite Tarantino again coming under attack for startling violence perpetrated during his hyper-real carnival, not to mention the torrent of creative cussing, *Pulp Fiction* went off at cinemas, audiences and critics alike falling over themselves to deify it.

Kicking off with Pumpkin (*Dogs*' Roth) and Honey Bunny (Amanda Plummer) conversing hiply about robbery before committing one, *Pulp Fiction* confounded with its ability to sustain immortal "everyday" dialogue, three divergent but converging subplots, graphic surprises, and several career-defining turns.

Travolta's Euro-riffing, laidback hit man Vincent Vega (Tarantino fought for The Urban Cowboy, whose turn in Brian De Palma's *Blow Out* he cites as "one of my favourite performances") is the most glaring example of QT's knack for getting greatness from unexpected participants. But Jackson's funk-ified, divinely intervened Jules, Willis' punch-drunk pugilist Butch, Ving Rhames' vengeful Marsellus Wallace, Uma Thurman's iconic Mia Wallace and Harvey Keitel's gruff Wolf etched enduring characters who melded majestically into a rock 'n' roll whole of legendary scope.

"This film is too intense for human beings," trilled Tarantino when asked about how he felt that, during the infamous adrenaline-shot scene involving Travolta, Thurman and her breastplate, an audience member at a New York City premiere had a seizure.

"I can stop people's hearts. That's cinema." **BEN MCEACHEN**

# The Before Trilogy

## Three colours love

**1995-2013** / CERT **15** / DIRECTOR **RICHARD LINKLATER** / SCREENWRITERS **RICHARD LINKLATER, KIM KRIZAN, ETHAN HAWKE, JULIE DELPY** / CAST **ETHAN HAWKE, JULIE DELPY**

WHEN ASSESSING *BOYHOOD* back in the October 2014 issue, *Empire*'s reviewer (full disclosure: your writer here) offered the opinion that Richard Linklater's eventual Best Picture nominee was "possibly the director's masterpiece to date". In the first draft of the review, no doubt was expressed. But in went the "possibly", added not through a faltering belief in *Boyhood*, but in tribute to Linklater's semi-concurrent meditation on the passage of time, the *Before* trilogy: *Before Sunrise* (1995), *Before Sunset* (2004) and *Before Midnight* (2013).

In 1989, Linklater had met a young woman, Amy Lehrhaupt, in a Philadelphia toy shop and, he told the *Chicago Tribune*, spent "from midnight until six in the morning walking around, flirting, doing things you would never do now". For *Sunrise*, this magical night would shift to Vienna, and the protagonists become American college boy Jesse (Ethan Hawke), on his way back to the States, and Sorbonne student Celine (Julie Delpy), heading home to Paris. Perhaps ominously thrown together by a fighting middle-aged couple sharing their train carriage, they disembark in the Austrian capital and walk and talk their way around this new, exciting city, covering life, death and all that falls between. And that's about it, plotwise, aside from the crucial mini-twist ending where the pair decide not to stay in touch but instead meet up on that same Vienna platform six months later. From childhood memories to quoting Auden, time is referenced throughout the movie, but is not yet a mortal enemy — merely, like distance, a logistical pain in the ass.

It's a hugely seductive film, beautifully shot and charged with the chemistry of its leads. Yet while ending on an ambiguous note, there was no sense a follow-up was a given, or even required. In fact, *Before Sunset* surpassed and complemented it, receiving an Oscar nomination (for Best Adapted Screenplay) and giving *Sunrise* a new, richer context. Shot in 2003 — when Linklater was a year into *Boyhood*, his fictional young family there suffering the aftermath of divorce — Jesse and Celine are now in their early thirties, increasingly







The powers of love: Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy in (clockwise from below left) *Before Sunrise*, *Before Midnight* and *Before Sunset*.




worn down by doubts and regrets. Set in an idyllic Paris, all dappled streets and bijoux cafés, the pair hook up at a promotion for his new novel, based on that momentous Vienna night. ("I always thought maybe [Amy] would show up at a *Before Sunrise* screening or something," Linklater said to *The New York Times* in 2004. "She never did.") Time is now much more of the essence. Played out in 'real time' over just 80 minutes, there is a greater sense of urgency as the two catch up, Jesse's flight (again!) looming large. Delpy has spoken of how the apparent naturalism of all three films is deceptive, the lines co-written by Linklater, Hawke and Delpy then recorded and edited "so the dialogue will be 'flowy' and not too annoying". Such attention to detail particularly defines *Sunset*, with visual echoes of *Sunrise* throughout — note, for example, how in this film Celine reaches to touch Jesse's hair during their taxi fight but quickly withdraws her hand, just as Jesse did with her during their Q&A on a Viennese bus. Then it was flirtatious, now it's tender and sad.

Nine years later, a year before *Boyhood*, Linklater brought us *Before Midnight*. He dedicated the film to Amy Lehrhaupt. Linklater had learnt in 2010 that she'd been killed in a motorbike accident in 1994, just weeks before shooting started on the film she'd helped to inspire. *Midnight* is the wisest of the three, Jesse and Celine — now parents — wrestling with the irritations of a long-term relationship and a lack of fulfilment triggered by approaching middle age, the sense that time is running out. As they enjoy the last day of a seemingly perfect family holiday in Greece, the possibility of romantic love, the inevitable transience of human experience, all of their favourite topics since day one arise, but this time experienced so much more personally. As in *Sunset*, Linklater knits his three films together by echoing earlier, happier moments. Here we see Celine angrily put the kettle on mid-hotel-room argument, a contrast with her chamomile tea-making in *Sunset*'s final heady scene; a bottle of red wine, bought by their friends, is poured but left un-drunk as the fight escalates, a forlorn descendant of that bottle gifted by *Sunrise*'s bartender.

It's testament to the expert craft behind these films that while they succeed as discrete movies, together they feel like one — even in reverse order they work just as well, *Sunrise*'s bickering middle-aged couple on the train not so funny when we've just seen Jesse and Celine tear strips out of each other 18 years later. While hope remains, things, it seems, have come full circle. **LIZ BEARDSWORTH**

# Seven

## How to get a head in serial killing

**1995** / CERT **18** / DIRECTOR **DAVID FINCHER** / SCREENWRITER **ANDREW KEVIN WALKER** / CAST **MORGAN FREEMAN, BRAD PITT, KEVIN SPACEY**

"HONESTLY," ENQUIRES DETECTIVE Mills (Brad Pitt) of his partner, Detective Lt Somerset (Morgan Freeman), "have you ever seen anything like this?" Well, let's see... young, handsome white cop reluctantly teamed with weary black cop a week before the latter's retirement, unexpectedly facing a case so remarkable that a movie has to be made about it? Yep, this definitely has a familiar Riggs and Murtaugh ring about it. *Seven*, however, is the nega-*Lethal Weapon*: there's just one sparse action scene; sunshine-soaked LA is switched for a gloomy, anonymous city drowning in filthy rain; and the script's precious few gags have to fight to break free from its own relentless, crushing misery. Also, at no point does Kevin Spacey act out a Three Stooges routine.

That said, *Seven* very nearly did end up a generic '90s action film. Andrew Kevin Walker's script was considered so unbearably bleak by the studio (New Line's Arnold Kopelson reportedly stating, "This movie will never end with a head in a box") that it was rewritten to include a final-act, high-octane race against time to stop the killer before he got to the hero's wife, whose noggin remained firmly in place. In what turned out to be a serendipitous administrative error, New Line inadvertently sent out Walker's original script — boxed bonce and all — to David Fincher, who loved it. Wrangling ensued, but Fincher — no stranger to studio interference after a catastrophic experience on *Alien 3* — won out, thanks in no small part to support from Brad Pitt. Both men knew that if there was one thing people would remember *Seven* for in years to come, it would be the hero's wife's head in a box. They had the foresight to see what short-sighted studio heads could not.

It's appropriate, then, that sight and the act of seeing are themes that run through this film like blood powering its diseased, black heart. What we see (or don't see), and how we see it, are crucial to the *Seven* experience. Mills sees the world with a rookie's optimism that the good will out. Somerset's view, on the other hand, is filtered through specs stained with the blood of decades of death and despair. "You know, this isn't going to have a happy ending," he warns, with colossal understatement.

As an audience, we're forced to see proceedings entirely through the eyes of these two men. We never see the killer's crimes on screen, only the grisly aftermaths, and are left to watch and wait helplessly for the next act of John Doe's gruesome retribution to be discovered. It's a wickedly genius technique: left to see the murders in our minds, we conjure up all manner of horrors, and find ourselves reluctantly sharing Doe's hellish headspace. He's one of cinema's most evil creations, the atrocity of his deeds limited only by the terrible boundaries of our imagination.

*Seven* toys with our sense of sight most maliciously in its sepulchral crime scenes, in which not only is it hard to make out what we're looking at, but the hammering rain and interminable background hubbub of a city's soul at war with itself render characters' dialogue almost unintelligible. Our senses are heightened to such an extent that by the time Mills and Somerset discover the rotting body of the sloth victim, we can practically smell the acrid tang of decaying human flesh combined with dozens of pungent Magic Tree air fresheners.

Fincher, and cinematographer Darius Khondji, won't even let us see the film in the way we're used to. Establishing wide shots are few and far between, while extreme close-ups are shot with such shallow depth of field that we're left to piece together much of what's on screen like, well, detectives solving a crime. It's no coincidence that with everyone suffering from such an abject failure to see the whole picture, John Doe has to circle the eyes on a photo of the greed victim's wife to show the way to the next piece of the puzzle.

It's only at the end, when Doe inexplicably gives himself up, that things begin to become clear. The final half-hour remains as dread-infused with repeat viewings as it ever was, but Fincher opens up the landscape, taking us out of dank, claustrophobic sets and into the wide open space of the harshly lit outdoors, for a devastating finale in which he sheds light on everything we've been put through thus far.

As with all great stories, you can choose to see *Seven* from various points of view: Andrew Kevin Walker calls it "my love letter to New York City"; as David Fincher's follow-up to *Alien 3* it's the tale of a man so frustrated by his experiences that he exorcises his demons by producing a grand, yet macabre, work; some viewers see a pessimistic social allegory about the general futility and unpleasantness of modern life. If




Mills (Brad Pitt) and Somerset (Morgan Freeman) on John Doe's trail. **Below right:** Gwyneth Paltrow as Mills' wife, sadly not called Jack.

**"WE CAN PRACTICALLY SMELL THE ACRID TANG OF DECAYING FLESH."**

none of those apply then it is, at the least, the last great serial killer movie.

David Fincher tells a story about an argument he got into with a woman who, after watching *Seven*, berated him for showing Gwyneth Paltrow's severed head inside the cardboard box. She found it appalling that he should deem it necessary to put such a sickening image in front of an audience. She was, of course, mistaken. She never saw a head in a box, but no matter how strenuously Fincher tried to convince her of this, she refused to believe him. It's a testament to a filmmaker with a unique visual talent that many of us thought we'd seen things we hadn't, but it's also proof that Fincher was dead right about *Seven*'s legacy: its defining image is something we never actually saw. So the answer to Detective Mills' query is a resounding, "No": we never have seen, and never will see, anything like this. **NEIL ALCOCK**



# Toy Story

## Pixar's triumph, still box-fresh

**1995** / CERT **PG** /
DIRECTOR
**JOHN LASSETER** /
SCREENWRITERS
**JOSS WHEDON, ANDREW STANTON, JOEL COHEN, ALEC SOKOLOW** /
CAST **TOM HANKS, TIM ALLEN**




THE REASONS *TOY Story* seems groundbreaking now are not necessarily the same reasons it seemed revolutionary in 1995. Back then, we were in comparatively Neolithic days of computer animation, and how we marvelled that little ones and zeros could be crammed together by very clever people in such a way that they eventually spat out a full-length movie from the floppy disk drive, or however it worked. There was talk of "render farms" working hundreds of thousands of hours on their crop, and "texture mapping" and "wireframes". We had no idea what that meant, but they sounded like words from the future. What a time to be alive. So, much of the attention at the time was on the method and what a brave new technological world it heralded. But now, less than two decades on, looking back from a time when literally anything can be realised in animation, *Toy Story* looks ancient, like the animatic stage of any modern CG film. Yet in other ways it has not aged. Because what *Toy Story* did that was so important was not usher in a new medium — the chosen medium no more makes a film than the chosen instrument makes a song — but usher in a new way of thinking.

Before *Toy Story*, the vast majority of animated movies had been adaptations of existing stories, typically fairy tales (we're talking Western animated movies here; Japanese animation was much more given to original ideas, but very few crossed over internationally). There were exceptions, like *The Lion King*, which had been a giant hit the previous year, but they were rare. Animation was a way to bring storybooks to life and only really to be considered if making a film for children. *Toy Story* changed it to simply being a way to tell tales, whether they started on a page or in the most bizarre recesses of your mind. That might sound minor, but it's huge. It made animation not the sole preserve of children's movies but a filmmaking tool that knocked aside all limitations.

It started with a very simple, universally relatable idea. Everyone of any age has always quietly suspected that their childhood toys have a secret life and that all playthings have, on some level, feelings. Try hitting a teddy bear in the face in a room of grown-ups and at least one or two will rush to its defence. The idea of toys coming to life had existed in storytelling for centuries, but *Toy Story* took this further, imagining social hierarchies and communities within this world, where positions of authority were precarious and relationships complicated. Toys, they're just like you and me, but sometimes they need new batteries.

A good idea does not make a masterpiece, though. What makes *Toy Story* timeless is its comedy writing, as snappy and smart as any other film you might care to pit it against. The sophistication of Buzz (voiced by Tim Allen) and Woody (voiced by Tom Hanks) is incredible. It's no simple task to make either of those two sympathetic. Woody, the ageing cowboy doll who should likely



Space ranger Buzz Lightyear (Tim Allen) meets local law enforcement Woody (Tom Hanks).

have been cast into a charity shop decades ago, is jealous, vengeful and proud. Buzz, the deluded spaceman, is cocky and stupid. Either could very easily have been a villain, but in *Toy Story*'s script they are instead real, mostly constructed of man-made materials but with the very human frailty of a need to be needed and a terror that they might not matter. It's dealing with some pretty heavy concerns — which continued for the rest of the series, *Toy Story 2* being about abandonment and the end of love, and *Toy Story 3* about the inevitability of old age and death — but with the lightest touch, sprinkling the neuroses with hive-mind aliens and dinosaurs paranoid about their stumpy extremities. You could write many essays about the psychological symbolism of *Toy Story*, and people have. There's that much going on.

It's not quite true to say that *Toy Story* was the film that started making cartoons with one eye on the children and one eye on the adults. *Beauty And The Beast* and, more so, *Aladdin* both had lots of sly wit that wooshed over the heads of toddlers. Instead, *Toy Story* is really the first not to think in terms of children or adults at all, but in terms of imagination and the human capacity for wonder. A good story and a good joke can be universal. Pixar's greatest gift to cinema was to make filmmakers consider computer animation as just another way to realise ideas. Not as a way to keep children interested but as a way to put a story on film in exactly the way it exists in the creator's head. *Toy Story* gave way to films like *Finding Nemo* and *Monsters, Inc.*, which couldn't

**"USHERED IN NOT ONLY A NEW MEDIUM, BUT A NEW WAY OF THINKING."**

be made outside of animation, but also films like *Up* and *The Incredibles*, which would be entirely possible as live-action ideas, but might not be quite the same.

The success of *Toy Story* lit a fire under the animation industry. Its financial success and popularity with all ages caused a swell of inspiration unmatched at any time in history. Studios that couldn't be bothered with cartoons previously started throwing money at them. There are more original ideas now than there ever were in the days when hand-drawn animation was the only option. *Kung Fu Panda, Ice Age, Despicable Me, Madagascar, Happy Feet, The Croods*... Those are not necessarily all great films, and not one of them a match for *Toy Story*, but they're all original creations and illustrate how broad the range of animation is now; how it's become not secondary to "proper films" but just another part of film. By messing around with playthings, *Toy Story* made a whole industry grow up. **OLLY RICHARDS**

# Fargo

## There's no trouble like snow trouble

**1996** / CERT **18** / DIRECTORS **JOEL COEN, ETHAN COEN** / SCREENWRITERS **JOEL COEN, ETHAN COEN** / CAST **WILLIAM H MACY, FRANCES MCDORMAND, STEVE BUSCEMI**

THE WORLD HAS many things to thank Joel Silver for: the sweaty excesses of *Die Hard*; Arnie going *mano a mano* with a giant, vagina-faced Republican in *Predator*; flo-mo and, indeed, bullet time. But, in a way, it has him to thank for the Coen brothers' most perfect film: *Fargo*.

In 1993, mega-producer Silver — evidently a man of more refined tastes than *Road House* might suggest — attempted to bring the joys of the Coens to a wider audience; the brothers, he might have thought, had languished too long in the sole affections of pasty-skinned cinephiles. He acquired the screenplay to *The Hudsucker Proxy*, organised their largest-ever budget along with now Coen regulars Tim Bevan and Eric Fellner, and delivered unto the world a Coen extravaganza. The world didn't care. *Hudsucker* flopped commercially, and attracted the worst reviews the pair had ever received.

Though not actually bad — the Coens have proven themselves constitutionally incapable of such a thing — *Hudsucker* was somehow out of whack; this was whimsical eccentricity with the volume at 11. Their sense must have been that they had strayed too far from home. Time, then, to return to the place and kind of filmmaking they knew best. *Fargo* opens with a grey Minnesotan sky/snowscape — a bleak, frozen world in which the horizon is indiscernable ("Whiteness and weirdness," as cinematographer Roger Deakins would describe the shooting style).

It's an apt beginning for a movie in which everyone arrives with a minimum of backstory, as if they have all simply appeared out of the snow, and whose moral sense, for the most part, is just as indistinct. Who are putative kidnappers Carl (Steve Buscemi) and Gaear (Peter Stormare)? How did they get together? Why is Jerry (William H Macy) so desperate for money that he has his wife kidnapped in the first place? What is the source of Wade's (the fantastically bullish Harve Presnell, for whom *Fargo* provided an escape from touring musicals) intense dislike of his son-in-law?

Well, maybe the last one doesn't need much explanation. Robert Burns' oft-quoted observation that "the best laid schemes o' mice an' men / Gang aft agley" might form the basis of *Fargo*'s chilly philosophy, but Jerry Lundegaard is more of a rat. And has there ever been a more unmercifully sketched rodent? We meet him at work, conning, in a veritable fireworks display of shrugs and sighs and downcast eyes, an honest customer out of his hard-earned cash: flogging him a car equipped with an under-seal he has specified he has absolutely no wish to buy. (Ethan later claimed that the dialogue is an almost verbatim transcript of a conversation he had while attempting to buy an under-seal-less motor.)

Perhaps Jerry's profession is key; maybe part of the film's boundless savour is the slightly sadistic pleasure the audience gets watching a car salesman's life put through the wringer. Macy's performance is a joy, a rich symphony of wheedling, shit-kicking, faux-pally insincerity. Buscemi's demise, his brutal transformation into a streak of gore on the snow via the machinations of a wood-chipper, is so outrageous that it occasionally obscures Jerry's lusciously satisfying final moments: we find him a hooting, wailing wreck of a man being forcibly restrained by police officers after attempting to escape through a motel-room lavatory window. Call it hubris, call it schadenfreude — you'd have to have a heart of stone not to grin with delight. But it's only one in a feast of thespian succulence. Buscemi had worked with the Coens before (*Miller's Crossing*, *Barton Fink* and *Hudsucker*), and here they rewarded him with the role of a lifetime: his seedily 'stached kidnapper manages to be both unpleasantly ruthless and, in the end, unconscionably violent, but also, with the exception of Marge, the sanest card in the loopy deck. His cry of, "What is it with you people? You fuckin' imbeciles!" as Wade refuses to hand over the cash is the lament of a man who has found himself in the middle of an open-air psychiatric facility. But there isn't a duff performance in sight, from Stormare's militantly taciturn Gaear Grimsrud — whose sparse dialogue eccentrically includes the word "unguent" — to the wealth of winningly sketched and played Minnesotans, including a pair of prostitutes whose idea of a distinguishing feature is the presence of a foreskin.

*Fargo* is a putative police procedural that exuberantly refuses to proceed in anything like a predictable direction, but it breaks the genre's rules with such ridiculous confidence that you can't imagine why there were rules in the first place. Halfway through Marge's quietly efficient hunt for the killers, the screenplay does a screeching handbrake turn and takes her to an exquisitely uncomfortable reunion with a former classmate (Steve Park), a sequence that delivers its own corkscrew twist when his tearful declaration of his wife's death turns out to be part of his seduction technique. (One guy having his wife kidnapped for cash, another 'killing' his for a hook-up? No wonder some Midwesterners felt *Fargo* presented a less than flattering portrait of Minnesotans. And we haven't even got to the accents.)

And then, of course, there's Frances McDormand, who pulls off the incredible feat of making honest, unpretentious goodness believable. That *Fargo*, then, was a homecoming for its writer/directors might account for its odd cosiness, its essential warmth amongst all the blood and ice. It is a little piece of movie perfection: a scene captured in a snow dome, but one that when shaken turns blood-red. Cheers, Mr Silver. **ADAM SMITH**



Aw, gee: Frances McDormand's Marge Gunderson discovers a murdered colleague.



Drew Barrymore, giving us the first glimpse of the title.

# Scream

## Still-scary movie

**1996** / CERT **18** / DIRECTOR **WES CRAVEN** / SCREENWRITER **KEVIN WILLIAMSON** / CAST **NEVE CAMPBELL, COURTENEY COX, DAVID ARQUETTE**

WES CRAVEN'S LITTLE horror flick changed pretty much everything for the genre and beyond. Interestingly, *Scream*, whose smart, pop culture-drenched irony has seeped indelibly into the rest of youth moviedom wasn't Wes Craven's first attempt at recursive horror mischief. In 1994 he had returned to the franchise that had helped define the slasher genre and delivered *Wes Craven's New Nightmare*, a po-mo confection that had Craven himself starring along with Robert Englund as themselves. *New Nightmare*, insufficiently explained to audiences, failed to connect. Part of the problem was that while Craven had always been a master technician — a maestro of perfectly staged slaughter — his characters had never been particularly sympathetic, never mind funny. *The Last House On The Left* and *The Hills Have Eyes* relied heavily on Craven's willingness to go the extra shocking mile, but it was mostly difficult to warm to the victims of his grue-drenched tableaux. But over in Palm Springs, a young screenwriter called Kevin Williamson was about to fix that.

Given *Scream*'s toying with the line between "reality" and "fiction", it's strange that more is not made of the fact that it has its roots in a true story: that of the Gainesville Ripper, a serial killer who terrorised college students in the late 1980s. While watching a trashy TV doc about the killings, Williamson, alone in the house, noticed an open window and, no doubt after checking under the beds, began pondering the slasher films he had enjoyed in the '80s but whose conventions had become so clichéd that retreading them without generating guffaws seemed impossible. But what if you aimed not just for guffaws, but also shrieks?

The resulting screenplay, then titled 'Scary Movie', provoked a furious bidding war, finally going to Miramax spin-off Dimension for $400,000, where Harvey Weinstein brought in Craven to direct, brave given *New Nightmare*'s box-office failure. Cast-wise a canny Craven opted not for the unknowns of dubious skill who had generally populated the slasher genre, instead raiding hip TV shows — *Friends*' Courteney Cox for bitchy reporter Gale and *Party Of Five*'s Neve Campbell for chief victim Sidney — while quality talent such as Matthew Lillard, David Arquette and Skeet Ulrich allowed Craven to mock genre cliché while avoiding falling headlong into it.

And therein lies the genius of *Scream*: the seamless segue of Craven's technical prowess into Williamson's smart, sexy take on the slasher's turgid tropes. Its opening sequence, a short masterpiece in its own right, manages to first undermine, then brilliantly re-establish the primal scares of a home-invasion set-up, before performing another U-turn and concluding with a coup de shocker that resonates through the rest of the film. Frankly, after you've witnessed poor Drew Barrymore strung up like an animal carcass choking her last breaths down the phone to her sobbing parents, every laugh is tinged with anxiety.

Reaction varied, with many critics dismissing the movie as standard youth-exploitation fare, while even those who liked it were unsure how it would be received and what effect, if any, it would have on the genre. ("Its underlying mockish tone won't please die-hard fans," pontificated *Variety*, while *Entertainment Weekly*'s Owen Gleiberman predicted, "I seriously doubt that *Scream* will spark a splatter-movie revival.") As it turned out, it would be difficult to overestimate *Scream*'s subsequent influence. It certainly sent the horror movie into new and surprising directions. Enter stage left found-footage flicks in the shape of *The Blair Witch Project* (see page 176) and later *Paranormal Activity*. Eli Roth and James Wan struck forth on varyingly tasteless forays into torture porn (the *Hostel* and *Saw* franchises). The ghost story was reinvigorated, along with a welcome Western interest in foreign horror (*Ringu*, *Dark Water*), while the vampire movie revived (*Let The Right One In*) and the zombie genre reanimated (*28 Days Later*).

"Movies don't create psychos, movies make psychos more creative!" Billy Loomis crows during *Scream*'s final moments. In fact, *Scream* made almost everyone working in yoof movies more creative; nearly 20 years after its release, *Scream* has emerged as a '90s masterpiece and a genre classic. **ADAM SMITH**

**"FIRST UNDERMINES, THEN BRILLIANTLY RE-ESTABLISHES PRIMAL SCARES."**

# L.A. Confidential

## California schemin'

**1997** / CERT **18** / DIRECTOR **CURTIS HANSON** / SCREENWRITERS **BRIAN HELGELAND, CURTIS HANSON** / CAST **KEVIN SPACEY, RUSSELL CROWE, GUY PEARCE**

BY THE LATE '90s the Hollywood crime genre thrived in the gloom of twin shadows. One long silhouette was cast by a certain Dr Lecter. The other trailed a long-chinned, fast-talking former video-store clerk named Quentin Tarantino. If we weren't watching snappy modern minor-crim capers like *The Usual Suspects* and *Things To Do In Denver When You're Dead*, it was all about the unusually twisted serial killers who stalked *Kalifornia*, *Kiss The Girls* and, of course, *Seven* (see page 166). What nobody was seeking, or expecting, was a sun-soaked noir about '50s detectives with an almost cheesy, old-school title. Not least one starring two virtually unknown Australians, adapted from a tough, dense novel (the third part of a "quartet", no less) and directed by a guy known for middle-class-threat thrillers.

Curtis Hanson had, as he put it, been accruing filmmaking "capital" with glossy pictures like *The Hand That Rocks The Cradle* and *The River Wild*. And he wanted to blow it all on something he thought personal, risky, uncommercial. Hanson had grown up amid the orange groves of Reseda, but as a kid earned extra cash selling shoes at his uncle Jack's swish Beverly Hills clothes shop, whose patrons included Audrey Hepburn and Marilyn Monroe. Some of that cash was traded for theatre tickets, so young Hanson could delve into black-and-grey underworlds that thrillingly and suspensefully sold him the dark side of his "golden city".

The dark and the golden, crime and Hollywood, were fiendishly entwined in James Ellroy's sprawling 1990 book *L.A. Confidential*, which Hanson felt was an ideal source for his dream project. Young screenwriter Brian Helgeland agreed. He'd befriended Ellroy at a book signing for *L.A. Confidential*'s antecedent *The Big Nowhere*, and he and Hanson joined forces, together tackling the ultimate adaptation challenge. The problem was convincing anyone else it was actually worthwhile.

Film noir? Ensemble cast? No big stars? History's squarest decade? Warner Bros baulked, and Hanson ended up making it on a budget at Arnon Milchan's New Regency. Very much under the radar — off the record, on the QT, and very hush-hush. Tight cast, on location, only one major set-build. Then, in May 1997, it screened at the Cannes Film Festival, to a resounding, "Wow!" Even its actors were surprised. Kevin Spacey (the film's hottest name) recalls Danny DeVito (its biggest name) mugging at him after lights-up, wide-eyed, palms out: "Who woulda thought?!" Later that year it was released to universal acclaim. By Warner Bros.

As with all great twists, the clues had been there all along. The biggest being that script. Even when you set aside the extreme rationalisation it required, all the slicing through that thick web of subplots, it is hard to find a more elegant, efficient and effective screenplay from the last 25 years. Within ten minutes, Hanson/Helgeland have introduced every major character: the trio of nominal cop heroes, the villain, the suspects and the victims of the all-night diner massacre at the plot's heart — which will be investigated twice. And we know them all, instantaneously. Or at least, we know how they *are*. The revelations come when they start becoming what they *want* to be... Or is it the other way around?

Ed Exley (Guy Pearce) is the ambitious, unlikeable young coolhead. Bud White (Russell Crowe) an impetuous thug whose violence is channelled towards wifebeaters.




Jack Vincennes (Kevin Spacey) the fame-hungry smoothie. Then there's high-end prostitute Lynn Bracken (Kim Basinger): Veronica Lake sexy but also worldly and motherly. Perpetually energised tabloid sleazebag Sid Hudgens (Danny DeVito). And cop boss Dudley Smith (James Cromwell — Farmer Hoggett from *Babe*!), upfront about his brutal, rulebreaking ways, but so avuncular and articulate we instantly accept them, conditioned as we are by the cliché of the maverick cop who gets results. Should we be so shocked when he puts a bullet in poor Jack's heart? A corrupt policeman who ties people to chairs and has them beaten... is... the bad guy?! The fact that it remains one of the 1990s' great twists illustrates the script's sheer, Bolshoi-balletic sophistication.

Then there's Hanson's casting. He was insistent White and Exley be

**"EXPERTLY WROUGHT AND VISUALLY MASTERFUL, OSCARS WERE WON, CAREERS MADE."**



Young guns: Russell Crowe and Guy Pearce broke out with *L.A. Confidential.* **Below:** Crowe with Kim Basinger's femme fatale.



unknowns. So we got a pair of authentic actors who arrived without baggage, hungry to prove themselves. Tough parts, both. How to make the muscle convincingly reveal hidden smarts? How to make the calculating ladder-scrambler heroic and engaging? Cast the *Romper Stomper* and Mike from *Neighbours*. Genius.

Spacey, of course, had baggage, but precisely the right kind. Verbal Kint, John Doe — here was the bone tossed to the modern crime-hound. And man, could he sell it. His is one of the finest death scenes in cinema, hands down. (His secret? A pair of black dots drawn on the wall opposite that he could focus on and thereby act the light leaving Vincennes's eyes.)

Spacey's presence signifies what made *L.A. Confidential* truly triumph. For all the concerns about period setting and going old-school in a new world, this is a thoroughly modern crime film. Note that not one of the leads wears a hat. That's important. As is the preponderance of reflections: men faced with their own images. And DP Dante Spinotti was instructed not to light the movie like a noir, giving it a naturalistic rather than nostalgic Californian glow... until the climactic shoot-out, with its unearthly lights beaming through bullet holes into a bloodstained-shack motel — as if to suggest the angels have finally returned to their city as these two men, White and Exley, ultimately do the right thing. Even if that does involve shooting an old man in the back.

*L.A. Confidential* did not start a successful new trend, or even make Ellroy adaptations viable (remember *Brown's Requiem?* Precisely). An attempt to launch a TV spin-off with Kiefer Sutherland as Vincennes went immediately nose-down. But it is as expertly wrought and visually masterful as those other crime-movie giants of the '90s, *The Silence Of The Lambs* and *Pulp Fiction*. Oscars were won, careers were made, but highest praise of all came from Ellroy himself, the "demon dog". Curtis Hanson and Brian Helgeland's movie was, he said, "a world that, yes, I created. But it's a world that I could not have possibly imagined." **DAN JOLIN**

# The Truman Show

## Unreality TV

**1998** / CERT **PG** / DIRECTOR **PETER WEIR** / SCREENWRITER **ANDREW NICCOL** / CAST **JIM CARREY, ED HARRIS, LAURA LINNEY**

SOMETIME IN 1995, Peter Weir, whose previous film, *Fearless*, had been an uncharacteristic and unexpected flop, found himself grievously disappointed with the screenplays that crossed his desk at home in Australia. Perhaps concerned that *Fearless*' under-performance had tarnished his reputation, he called his US agent. Was he seeing everything, he asked. Yes, came the reply. Well, all the A-list stuff anyway, the stuff befitting the multiple Oscar-nominated director of *Witness* and *Dead Poets Society*. Weir still wasn't happy. "Then send me the broken ones," he said, sick of the perfectly coiffed Hollywood dreck accumulating in his bin. Asked later what exactly it was he had been looking for, he had a single-word answer. "Trouble."

Andrew Niccol's *The Truman Show* fit that bill perfectly. Niccol, a New Zealander who had spent a decade in the then-roaring London advertising industry before moving to Hollywood, had sent a treatment titled *The Malcolm Show* to mega-producer Scott Rudin in the mid-'90s. Impeccably high-concept, its central character was an unremarkable Joe Shmoe, unaware that the world in which he lived was a vastly ambitious counterfeit, a gargantuan television studio populated by a cast of thousands, and that he was, and had always been, the star of an international TV show. Niccol had hoped to direct, but Paramount, who had bought the property for $1 million but who were already antsy about this "$80 million art film", weren't convinced. Financial fears were at least partly assuaged when Jim Carrey, despite the failure of *The Cable Guy*, agreed to star. Paramount then went on the hunt for a director who could both service the intellectual underpinnings of Niccol's dark media satire and preserve the multiplex-friendly, Capraesque qualities of the story, the fable of the little guy breaking free.

Weir was a perfect choice: he is not afraid of honest sentiment or the demands of commercial filmmaking. His films have often had a vague sense of dislocation, of being set in self-contained worlds that, while convincing, don't feel quite real. *Dead Poets Society*'s Welton Academy seems to exist in its own bubble, its old-fashioned, aristocratic values and customs in stark contrast to life at the local public high school. *Witness* has Harrison Ford as the ultimate outsider in the cloistered, alien world of the Amish, while his early masterpiece, *Picnic At Hanging Rock*, renders the boundary between reality and some otherly realm so porous that its virginal schoolgirls have a tendency to simply melt through it, into thin air. For *The Truman Show* he had intended to conjure the ersatz, synthetic quality of Seahaven, Truman's hoax hometown, on Los Angeles sound stages until his attention was drawn to Seaside, a planned community in Florida; a kind of real-life unreality of white picket fences, clapboard churches and perma-blue skies built by American idealists in the 1940s. It recalls David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, though its secret may be even more sinister.

Even back in 1998 there was something eerily prophetic about *The Truman Show*. It would be nice to say that reality television had then not been invented — it would be nice to say that without the qualifier "then" — but in fact MTV had been first to the faux factual with their shamelessly titled *The Real World* in 1992 (over in the Netherlands, *Big Brother*, the first violent squall of the coming reality typhoon, was a glint in producer John de Mol's eye). But in fact it was not so much the movie's concern with the future of television that gave *Truman* its immediacy. It was the notion of constant surveillance that was the disquieting hook. The proliferation of CCTV cameras was big news at the time, and issues of privacy, soon to be rendered laughably quaint by the internet, excited public debate. The image of an infant gazing from his crib towards a mobile, the centrepiece of which is a sinister, inescapably phallic, dangling camera lens, was then among the film's most unexpectedly shocking.

And there were the intimations of the threat to freedom of unchecked corporate dominion, not just in the relentless product placement weaved



**"RECALLS LYNCH'S *BLUE VELVET*, THOUGH ITS SECRET MAY BE EVEN MORE SINISTER."**



into Truman's life, but in the ownership of Truman himself. "I believe Truman is the first child who has been legally adopted by a corporation..." a simpering hack puts to 'Creator' Christof (Ed Harris, who replaced Dennis Hopper at the last minute, after a day-one dose of the Creative Differences). Attempts, so far futile, to copyright portions of the human genome began in the mid-2000s. (In 2006 the first cases of the informally named Truman Syndrome, a condition in which the patient believes himself to be the star of an ongoing reality show, were identified by shrinks.)

"Good afternoon, good evening and good night." Jim Carrey's remarkable turn as Truman Burbank.

Despite the TV spin-off announced in April 2014 ago by Paramount, *The Truman Show* has fallen into a mild obscurity. Carrey's imploded career might be part of the explanation, and perhaps the sheer pell-mell pace of technology has clouded its point. (The "miniature" cameras mounted on garbage bins are today as Walkmans to nanos, while in this media-splintered world, the idea of a single TV programme transfixing a household, let alone a planet, is a scheduler's dream.) But at its heart, *The Truman Show* is about voyeurism and celebrity and fate and what it means to be free, topics as relevant in the age of YouTube as they were when telly still came on tape. And in that, it's still as transfixing, disquieting and finally moving as it was 18 years ago. **ADAM SMITH**

# The Blair Witch Project

## New nightmare

**1999** / CERT **15** / DIRECTORS **DANIEL MYRICK, EDUARDO SÁNCHEZ** / SCREENWRITERS **DANIEL MYRICK, EDUARDO SÁNCHEZ** / CAST **HEATHER DONAHUE, JOSHUA LEONARD, MICHAEL C WILLIAMS**

"IN OCTOBER OF 1994, three student filmmakers disappeared in the woods near Burkittsville, Maryland, while shooting a documentary. A year later their footage was found."

With these two simple sentences, displayed in stark white type on a black background, a movie phenomenon was born: a film that cost around $22,000 to shoot grossed $250 million worldwide (excluding ancillaries like DVDs, books, comics, video games and merchandising), and ushered in the modern "found footage" genre which, while it produces mostly landfill, occasionally throws up a gem like *Chronicle*, *Paranormal Activity*, *[•REC]*, *V/H/S* or *The Bay*. To demonstrate its impact, Wikipedia lists nine "found footage" films made before *The Blair Witch Project* (notably the notorious *Cannibal Holocaust*), and nearly a hundred since. (Stanley Kubrick could have beaten them all, if he'd stuck with his concept of *Dr. Strangelove* as a faux-documentary discovered by aliens far in the future, revealing how the human race managed to blow itself up.)

In reality, no student filmmakers disappeared in Burkittsville in 1994; the footage that comprised *The Blair Witch Project* ('*TBWP*') was mostly shot by actors Heather Donahue, Michael C Williams and Joshua Leonard — generously lending credence to the film's it's-all-true conceit by using their real names in the credits — under the supervision of co-directors Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez. Armed with their actors, Best Buy-bought cameras and a 68-page outline (the dialogue would largely be improvised), the directors decamped to Seneca Creek State Park in Montgomery County, Maryland (only a few scenes were shot in Burkittsville itself), in October 1997, giving the actors just enough information to allow them to improvise the day's scenes. It took just eight days to shoot, eight months to edit, and another 12 months (once Artisan had acquired the $22,000 film for $1.1 million) to get it into suitable shape for its theatrical release. Not since Miramax picked up Kevin Smith's *Clerks* five years earlier had such a cheaply made film changed the lives of its creators overnight.

For all the innovation of its shooting approach, *TBWP* took its inspiration from some pretty musty stuff. Its mythology was a witches' brew of legend and folklore, while its narrative device was more-or-less lifted from the kind of turn-of-the-century horror stories in which authors such as HP Lovecraft would write a faux first-person account of some nameless horror, which eventually claims the hapless narrator, leaving the fragmented or unfinished tale to be discovered by someone else. (The film's production company, Haxan Films, is named in honour of Benjamin Christensen's silent 1922 film, a sort of documentary about witchcraft.) In Myrick and Sánchez's film, the doomed-narrator device is updated through the use of film cans, videotapes and DAT tapes, supposedly pieced together following their discovery, several years after Heather, Mike and Josh failed to return from their expedition. Thus, a peculiar sense of melancholy is added to the proceedings, not only because the three young, relatable protagonists are missing, presumed dead, but also because they never lived to see the success of their film. (See how it draws you in?) So convincing was the film's "based-on-actual-events" conceit that people were regularly reported to have turned up in Burkittsville, armed with their own cameras, offering to help search for Heather, Josh and Mike — who, based on their sudden fame (not to mention profit participation), were more likely to be found in the Hollywood hills than the Blair Witch woods.

Given its incredible reception and unprecedented budget-to-box office ratio in the US, there was a danger that *TBWP* would be eaten by its own hype by the time it arrived on these shores four months after its US release, and well into its inevitable "pfft — call that scary?" phase. British distributor Pathé even acknowledged the backlash, running the poster tagline "Everything you've heard is true" as a way to fan the flames of the based-on-actual-events

**"YOU FEEL WHAT THEY FEEL — MOSTLY FOREBODING, DREAD AND ABJECT FEAR."**

Heather Donahue, terrified in the groundbreaking found-footage film.

conceit, and to suggest that the film was worthy of the American hype. By the time it was released here, just in time for Hallowe'en, British audiences had already been told it was the horror film of their generation, rather than being able to discover for themselves that it was (well, this or *Scream*), but it didn't matter, because the film delivered. From the ingenious set-up to the unforgettable denouement, Myrick and Sánchez build tension and verisimilitude in equal parts, so that even if you go into the woods with Heather, Josh and Mike knowing "it's only a movie", you've effectively forgotten within five minutes. Instead, you're with them as they enter the forest with just enough film, tape, snacks and batteries to keep them going for three days; as they lose their way, abandoning first the map, then the documentary itself; and as they venture deeper and deeper into the woods, pursued by someone or some Thing. You see what they (or their cameras) see, hear what they hear, and feel what they feel — mostly foreboding, dread and abject fear. It didn't hurt (or, in some cases, it did) that much of the film was shot with unsteady-cam handheld cameras, which led to cases of motion sickness and actual vomiting. (William Castle would have approved.)

Admittedly, whether your reaction to the film was, "That was some scary shit," or, "That was super-smart," depended largely on your own ability, or willingness, to suspend disbelief. Swept into the cinema on a wave of hype, or watching years later at home, you might even have greeted the film with a resounding, "Meh." But as an exercise in making movies without money, inducing paranoia without production value, and conjuring scares without special effects, *The Blair Witch Project* is more than worthy of the Masterpiece mantle. Even if it was just, as the filmmakers themselves modestly suggest, "a film shot mostly on Hi-8 video in Maryland in October 1997 for 22,000 bucks by a ragtag group spending their savings and risking their already pockmarked credit ratings on one last-ditch effort to become filmmakers." **DAVID HUGHES**

# Magnolia

## PT Anderson's random encounters with rage, forgiveness and grace

**1999** / CERT **18** / DIRECTOR **PAUL THOMAS ANDERSON** / SCREENWRITER **PAUL THOMAS ANDERSON** / CAST **TOM CRUISE, JASON ROBARDS, JULIANNE MOORE**

ALL OF PAUL Thomas Anderson's films are about family. In *Hard Eight*, a schlub finds an unlikely father. In *Boogie Nights*, porn provides the parents. In *Punch-Drunk Love*, Adam Sandler is enraged by seven insufferable sisters. In *There Will Be Blood*, an adoptive dad proves just as damaged as the biological child-raisers in *Magnolia*, a film where the somewhat obtuse tagline — "Things fall down. People look up. And when it rains, it pours" — could readily be replaced by Philip Larkin's infamous line: "They fuck you up, your mum and dad."

The English poet's *This Be The Verse* explains why and how faults pass down the generations, but ends on a beat both sour and glib. ("Man hands on misery to man/It deepens like a coastal shelf/Get out as early as you can/And don't have any kids yourself.") This is something, somehow, *Magnolia* avoids. It has anger, but isn't consumed by it. It is clear-eyed, but not pessimistic. It is honest, but has hope.

Anderson made it when he was 28. Not unburdened by ego or ability, it seems likely he didn't have to search inside himself for long to conjure characters who are angry, arrogant or — even if they do say so themselves — quite brilliant. But there is also decency and love here. The writer-director was born in Studio City, California, and grew up in the San Fernando Valley. He had three sisters, a half-sister and four half-brothers — more than enough family, you'd think, for any man. His father, Ernie, was an actor, voice-over artist and, before PT arrived on the stage, a TV host for late-night horror movies. Growing up, Anderson's dreams were made of celluloid. He used to tell his teachers he would win an Oscar (he hasn't, personally, yet). Precocious is the word.

Ernie died of cancer in 1997, nine months before *Boogie Nights*' release. Out of this, it seems, grew *Magnolia*. It's a film made by someone who has woken up to mortality and is beginning to know that they know very little about the way — and why — the world works. The title came to him at random, though he subsequently read the theory that eating magnolia bark can help cure cancer — a cancer suffered by two characters here, fathers whose sins have certainly affected their children.

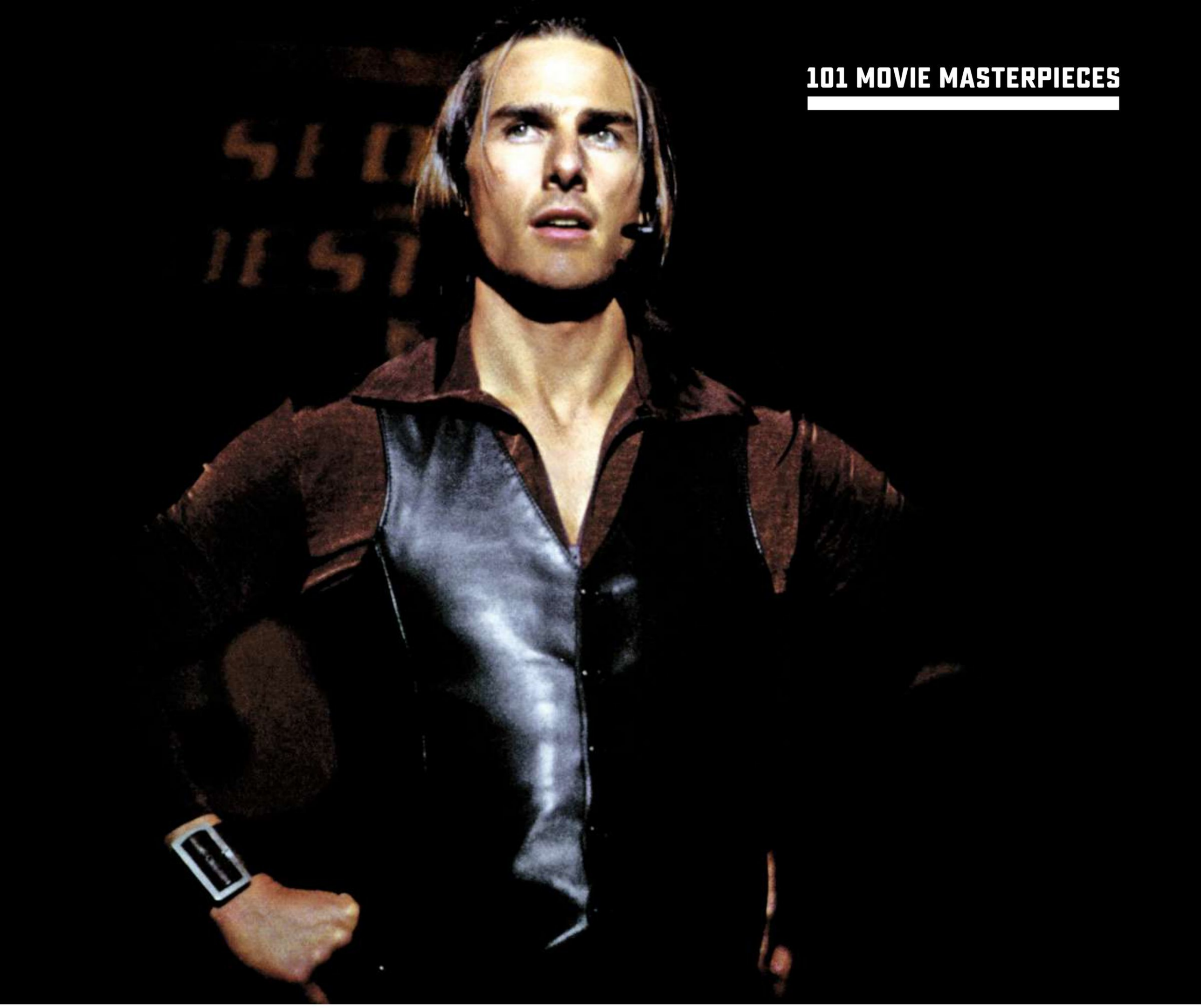
Also among Anderson's reading was the work of Charles Fort — the author whose life-long interest in unusual phenomena and the paranormal lead to his name becoming a byword for the unexplained: Fortean. Out of this sprang the infamous rain of frogs that finishes the picture — an incident the filmmaker didn't realise was in the Bible. When veteran actor Henry Gibson (who plays the well-heeled bar-fly who angers William H Macy's erstwhile child prodigy) pointed it out to him, he incorporated references to the relevant verse (Exodus 8:2) throughout the film. *Magnolia* is a movie made by someone grasping for something more; someone who would like to believe. They're just not sure in what.

Coincidence and connection is what strikes you on first viewing — the way these characters apparently randomly interweave. So, for example, the cop (John C Reilly) helps the daughter (Melora Walters) of the host (Philip Baker Hall) of the quiz show whose ex-contestant (Macy) is caught robbing a store by the cop (Reilly)... Whose gun is stolen by a boy (Emmanuel Johnson) who saves the gold-digging wife (Julianne Moore) of the quiz show producer (Jason Robards) who the hospice nurse (Philip Seymour Hoffman) is trying to reunite with his estranged son (Tom Cruise).

But this isn't the point — other than to suggest the extraordinary is everyday and, of course, everyone is connected.

**"THE POINT IS, THE EXTRAORDINARY IS EVERYDAY AND, OF COURSE, THAT EVERYONE IS CONNECTED."**

Think about it and you know this — the world is small, coincidence is just existence and contrived relationships only exist in fiction; in reality, they are just fact. This may make Magnolia interesting, but what makes it special is how it deals with choice: who we choose to be, who we choose to help, who we choose to forgive — or try to forget. As the Narrator — and a couple of characters — say, "We may be through with the past, but the past ain't through with us." Where we've come from, who raised us and scarred us stays with us, but need not — it's suggested through Reilly's decent policeman — define us. Ironically, the law-enforcer is virtually the only character who doesn't judge, either himself or others. Even off-screen bit-part players can be condemnatory here. There's a scene 47 minutes in which most filmmakers would cut, but is actually



Tom Cruise on startling form in PT Anderson's *Magnolia*.

indicative of Anderson's genius. Hoffman phones a convenience store to have them deliver groceries... and porno mags, because he wants to find the number of Cruise's self-help seduction specialist. He lists the magazines — *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, *Hustler* — and the cashier's voice jabs down the line: "Do you still want the peanut butter, bread and cigarettes?" She is snide, sullen, accusatory — unjustly judging him as he tries to do a good deed. This voice of an off-screen character — a nobody — is used to illuminate a theme. Plus, it feels like life. Magnolia, of course, can hardly be described as *cinéma vérité*, with its grandstanding style, extravagant performances and deliberate, in-your-ear soundtrack. But that doesn't mean it's not genuine. Unlike the films of that other self-taught, VHS-generation director, Quentin Tarantino, there is no irony here, no distance.

This, despite what could be considered moments of magic realism — or plain daftness — such as the character collage where each person, pictured within their separate sets, sings along to Aimee Mann's song *Wise Up*. In a film that is in large part inspired by the ensemble work of Robert Altman, this scene actually shows the wisdom of another of Anderson's directing heroes, Stanley Kubrick, in his advice to actors: "Real is good; interesting is better." This isn't realistic, but it is heartfelt — walking the thin line between daring and ridiculous in a manner that proves unaccountably moving.

If Cruise comes to the end of his career and rivals Cary Grant for the title of Best Actor To Never Win An Oscar, his performance in *Magnolia* will stand out as the one he was most obviously robbed for — he is magnificent, with his movie-star magnetism ameliorating the character's more loathsome qualities. But it's perhaps the late Hoffman who has the trickiest task, playing a no-frills, caring character and carrying a key scene which could have been horribly self-conscious or defensive, but actually plays beautifully, when he explains just what he's doing on the phone: "I know this sounds silly and I know that I might sound ridiculous, like this is the scene of the movie where the guy is trying to get hold of the long-lost son, you know, but this is that scene, this is that scene. And I think they have those scenes in movies because they're true, you know, because they really happen. And you gotta believe me, this is really happening." It really happened. *Magnolia*: an epic of the emotions, about fighting with forgiveness, about ordinary people grasping for grace. **NEV PIERCE**

# Topsy-Turvy

## The lighter side of Leigh

**1999** / CERT **12** /
DIRECTOR
**MIKE LEIGH** /
SCREENWRITER
**MIKE LEIGH** /
CAST **JIM BROADBENT, DEXTER FLETCHER, TIMOTHY SPALL**



MIKE LEIGH'S GREAT subject is failure... his films are full of acutely observed quiet (and sometimes noisy) desperation as excruciatingly British people try to live up to an ideal they feel they ought to believe in but catastrophically fall apart, embarrassing themselves and everyone around them. By 1999, even Leigh must have felt this was something of a personal trap, so he set out to make *Topsy-Turvy*, a film about a great success — the 1885 first production of Gilbert and Sullivan's light opera, *The Mikado*. Of course, he finds room for all the personal failures and failings of a large cast of characters and catches the heartbreak that simmers even at his heroes' moment of triumph.

Considering films are made by people who ought to be interested in, and know a lot about, show business, it's amazing that so many biopics of show-folk present it with unbelievable inaccuracy. Take *Moulin Rouge*, for instance, in which the heroine doesn't turn up for the opening night of the show she's the star of but somehow isn't despised by the cast and crew she's thrown out of work. *Topsy-Turvy* understands the show and the business — we see contract negotiations and box office receipts as well as casting, rehearsal, costume-fitting and opening night.

Rather than tell the whole story of the playwright/lyricist WS Gilbert and composer/conductor Arthur Sullivan through three decades of thorny collaboration, *Topsy-Turvy* focuses on a few months that take them from a creative trough to a peak. After the lacklustre reception of the undistinguished *Princess Ida*, which opens during a heatwave that hits the theatre's takings, an ailing Sullivan (Allan Corduner) resolves to write no more light operas, though he and Gilbert (Jim Broadbent) have a contract with Richard D'Oyly Carte (Ron Cook) of the Savoy Theatre to deliver a new work. Gilbert's wife (Lesley Manville) nags him into visiting an exhibition of then-exotic Japanese culture, and he has an idea for a comic opera set in a Westernised fantasy of Japan. People always ask writers where their ideas come from; no film has shown the moment of inspiration better than this, as the camera gets slightly closer to Broadbent's moustache-twitching smile and the spark in Gilbert's eyes.

In his film, theatre and TV work, Leigh famously works with his cast to develop a script... here, he shows the whole process that intervenes between Gilbert's notion and the first night. A sequence in which Gilbert directs a trio of actors who haven't yet completely learned their lines, making slight changes to the wording or firmly resisting actors who want to alter the rhythm of the dialogue, is even more of a marvel when you realise that each slip of the tongue,

**"A MIX OF SLY, VERBAL, FELICITOUS COMEDY AND DEEP SADNESS."**



Timothy Spall as Richard Temple, stealing the show in Mike Leigh's *Topsy-Turvy.*

correction and improvisation has been scripted, learned and rehearsed before the performance we're seeing. Gilbert directs the cast and Sullivan conducts the orchestra with equal perfectionism, but entirely different personal styles — and both know the strength of the work will win over recalcitrants in the company. Andy Serkis does a complete turnaround as a strutting choreographer who goes from impatient irritation when Gilbert imports genuine Japanese women to demonstrate how to walk in costume to enthusiastic, credit-taking understanding as he sees what the director is getting at and makes a meal of the fan-slashing in *Three Little Maids From School Are We*.

The film manages thumbnail portraits not only of the authors of the piece but their family and dependents, the management of the Savoy Theatre and the show's cast, from the stars down to the chorus. There's a mix of sly, verbal, felicitous comedy and deep sadness, with the meticulous period setting allowing for moments of genuine theatricality: like the final snippet of the ageing leading lady (a remarkable Shirley Henderson) reading some lines of Yum-Yum's about her own beauty to the mirror, before appearing on stage to sing *The Sun Whose Rays*, a song that is a great deal more than merely amusing. Among the other marvellous, evocative cameo sequences are bits with Gilbert's dotty, deeply unhappy separated parents and enslaved sisters, which suggest why his own marriage is childless, but pays off with Manville's tragic recounting on the night of the great success of her own idea for an opera about the hideous gap in her own barren, constrained life.

Corduner's Sullivan, who has health problems and a mistress (Eleanor David), is a broader character than Broadbent's detailed and moving Gilbert, but Leigh shows an equal sensitivity to his feelings of being trapped in a limiting format even as we understand how the Savoy management and Gilbert are frustrated by his demand that their winning formula develop and improve. Working in period for the first time, Leigh has a detail-man's delight for the quaintly new-fangled — a "reservoir pen", an electric doorbell Gilbert's father is afraid of, lump sugar — and makes much play of Gilbert, Sullivan and D'Oyly Carte's 1880s 'early adopter' status, as keen on their newly installed telephonic communicators as any contemporary media type with his latest-generation tablet or mobile.

There's an 11th-hour crisis as Gilbert decrees that *A More Humane Mikado*, showpiece of popular comedian Richard Temple (Timothy Spall), be cut. Temple, a lone crude voice among polite Victorians, rants privately in shattered disappointment ("He's an absolute bastard!") but the members of the chorus argue his case and sway the apparently firm but clearly unsure Gilbert. We also get glimpses of the talents and traumas of the drug-using comic George Grossmith (Martin Savage), leading lady Leonora Braham (Henderson) and light tenor Durward Lely (Kevin McKidd). Leigh makes these people humorous figures but lets us see why they were great performers in their day, and the pain their efforts caused them. If it is, in the end, another hymn to the heartbreak behind the greasepaint, seldom has the theme been stated in such a committed, intelligent, powerful manner. **KIM NEWMAN**

# American Psycho

## Christian Bale sinks his teeth into killer capitalism

**2000** / CERT **18** / DIRECTOR **MARY HARRON** / SCREENWRITERS **MARY HARRON, GUINEVERE TURNER** / CAST **CHRISTIAN BALE, JUSTIN THEROUX, JOSH LUCAS**

WHEN WALL STREET melted down this time in 2008, it was hard not to feel a bit of schadenfreude as the Masters Of The Universe got their capitalist comeuppance. But how many of us are acquainted with hedge fund money movers and their ilk? Instead, we take our cues from the likes of *The Bonfire Of The Vanities* and *Wall Street*. But no filmmaker has ever skewered the self-absorption, greed and destructiveness of the species better than Mary Harron in *American Psycho*.

Based on Bret Easton Ellis' hugely controversial 1991 novel, the film is set in 1987, year of the last big share market shitfight. Over an undetermined period, we follow the titular creature, privileged New Yorker Patrick Bateman. A narcissist of forensic proportions ("After I remove the ice pack, I use a deep pore cleanser lotion..."), he can barely tolerate his vapid girlfriend ("Evelyn, my supposed fiancée, keeps buzzing in my ear"). He is just as alienated from his repulsive, interchangeable and similarly fashion-obsessed WASP posse ("Marcus also works at P&P and in fact does the same exact thing I do and he also has a penchant for Valentino suits and Oliver Peoples glasses..."), with whom he discusses women ("There are no girls with good personalities!") and nouvelle-cuisine restaurants ("The mud soup and the charcoal arugula are outrageous!"). When Bateman has finished pretending to work for the day, he unwinds with his drugged-to-oblivion mistress, porn or cocaine in a club. But what really floats his boat is torturing/killing people, preferably prefacing his victims' demise with his long-winded appreciations of the blandest pop music of the 1980s.

While these hysterical monologues — along with the voiceover and almost all the dialogue — are lifted from Ellis' book, the film stands as its own complementary entity. Harron retains just enough of the graphic violence to get her point across. Ellis' intention was savage social satire in the Swift mould, and he achieved it with deliberate overkill, equally in the depictions of violence and sex and in the liturgical recitation of designer brand names. In the book, this could be relentless, confronting and numbing, but the film turns such affectations into sleek high comedy.

But *American Psycho* nearly didn't happen in this configuration. Several scripts were written, including one by Ellis himself, but Harron and co-writer Guinevere Turner's won favour with Lionsgate. The director was a strong choice, having made her debut with 1996's well-regarded study of New York psychopathy *I Shot Andy Warhol*. That she was a woman could also help head off some of the feminist outrage.

From the outset, Harron wanted Bale, then still best known for his teen work in 1987's *Empire Of The Sun*, as Bateman. But when the star of *Titanic* wanted the role and the studio agreed, Harron walked. "Leonardo DiCaprio is a wonderful actor, but I didn't believe him as a Wall Street banker," Harron tells *Empire*. "He and his friends are all supposed to look alike... DiCaprio is very individual looking, you would never believe that kind of slight anonymity." Harron was replaced by Oliver Stone, perhaps looking for a synthesis of *Wall Street* and *Natural Born Killers*. When the shockateur and the A-lister lost interest, Harron and Bale returned to the project.

The Stone-DiCaprio film would've been a must-see, but it's hard to imagine a better *American Psycho* than the one Harron managed on less than $8 million, with Toronto standing in for New York. Bale has the face of a star and the body of a Calvin Klein model. But beneath the scrubbed surface lurks a Ted Bundy or Ed Kemper, serial killers he references in dialogue to his uncomprehending peers. Bale's is an intense, precise and hilarious performance. "There's just something that Christian brought to it, as he later proved with Batman, that he's really brilliant at playing characters with a mask, conveying something behind a double face," says Harron. The most famous of these moments is his peppy discourse on Huey Lewis as he prepares to sink an axe into yuppie scum Paul Allen. The transformation from innocuous goofball to blood-spattered



**"HARRON'S FILM AND ELLIS' BOOK RAISE A SCARIER PROSPECT: AMERICA AS PSYCHO."**

Christian Bale's Patrick Bateman gets set for some recreational murder.

maniac ("Try getting a reservation at Dorsia now, you fucking stupid bastard!") and then to reintegrated personality as he enjoys what amounts to a post-coital cigar is astounding, and astoundingly funny. Just as effective — and, shot and scored like a Hitchcock kill — is Bateman sweating as another rival unveils his new business card.

Bale is brilliant, but note needs to be made of the supports — Justin Theroux, Josh Lucas and Jared Leto; his ladies, Reese Witherspoon, Samantha Mathis and Chloë Sevigny; and Willem Dafoe as the investigator — all are perfect.

What many critics missed in the book, and what's faithfully carried over to the movie, is that the ultimate horror is not Bateman as a serial killer. If he is a murderer, then no-one cares. And that raises a scarier prospect: America as psycho. The other option — that all the killings are in his imagination — leads us to an equally horrifying proposition: endless madness. Such ambiguity — along with the rich script and performances, stately direction, and John Cale's mesmerising score juxtaposed with Whitney Houston, Robert Palmer, Katrina & The Waves and poor old Huey ("He hated the movie," says Harron) — means *American Psycho* rewards repeat viewings. While it took a respectable $15 million at the box office and won over some critics in 2000, it's a film whose stature continues to grow, and whose influences range from *Dexter* (the credits homage *American Psycho*'s opener) to Kanye West's *Love Lockdown* video (the R&B singer is in an apartment modelled on Bateman's).

Says Harron, "You know, once something has been accepted into the canon then people stop giving you a hard time." **MICHAEL ADAMS**

# The Lord Of The Rings Trilogy

## Peter Jackson's magnificent marathon

**2001-2003** / CERT **PG/12/12** / DIRECTOR **PETER JACKSON** / SCREENWRITERS **PETER JACKSON, FRAN WALSH, PHILIPPA BOYENS, STEPHEN SINCLAIR** / CAST **ELIJAH WOOD, IAN MCKELLEN, ORLANDO BLOOM**

JRR TOLKIEN'S THOUSAND-page edifice is, down at its nub, a story about "walking to a fucking volcano" (as famously described by that *Clerks* chap Kevin Smith). Peter Jackson's three-movie adaptation make no bones about that essential fact. There is plenty of walking.

But more than that, the craft, imagination, splendour and sheer volume of *The Lord Of The Rings* trilogy has resulted not simply in it becoming a temple of popular success, but something more important. As one complete unit, these movies have attained a classical status beyond contemporary comparisons. Fifteen years since the debut of *The Fellowship Of The Ring*, the series feels beyond debate. Ironically, given the relative qualities ascribed to film and literature, that is not something that can be said for the book, whose prominence in "Top 100 Best Reads" lists is continually buffeted by literary squares.

*Rings*, as in all three films played together — toilet breaks are permitted between Emyn Muil and the plains of Rohan, and the woods of Ithilien and an isolated culvert outside Morgul Vale — isn't, technically speaking, a trilogy. None of the films operate alone. It's not an overarching storyline, like *Star Wars*, that stops and picks up again at a later date. Over the initial (and necessary) release schedule, we simply paused, twice, mid-adventure. Our lives moved on (nearly) while Frodo was stuck in limbo, nagged by The One Ring's cocaine-lure.

So, not only do we now possess the means to watch it in one mighty slab of story, we get the chance to do so via Jackson's Extended Editions. Full of rangy character business and extra dollops of Tolkien's circuitous but all-encompassing mythos, these expanded cuts are certainly indulgent — but isn't such pregnant detail the be-all of the *Rings* formula? It is the iron conviction of Tolkien's invented world — the sense it has been thought out right down to the door hinges — which keeps its otherwise fanciful nature (elves, dwarves and hobbits, oh my!) so grounded. You can feel the consideration behind every facet, not only from Tolkien, but that man of *Bad Taste* too.

There's also the fact that the extended films are better paced. *The Two Towers*, of all three, was squeezed awkwardly into bladder-friendly viability for cinemas, and breathes easier when allowed to stretch. The battle scenes strung across all three films achieve a greater clarity with mini-narratives and flashes of individual heroics — Karl Urban's dashing Éomer does such a natty spin of the spear mid-gallop that it would be the coolest thing in *The Return Of The King* if it weren't for that damned elf. One might question the value of ent poetry, but there is something satisfying in gorging on the goodness of Tolkien's confection.

There are many reasons why Jackson became the director who found a way where others failed — even Stanley Kubrick was stymied, for which we should be thankful, considering he aimed to cast John Lennon as Gollum. Not the least of these reasons is that Jackson's homeland is possessed of such a variety of otherworldly scenery, hitherto ignored by non-Kiwi filmmakers. How obvious it appeared once production started and pictures leaked, seemingly direct from the Westfold. Up until *Rings*, the facility of artifice — what can be grown to order on a computer — was the principle among the boom and clatter of blockbuster-making, as if the real world could never provide the necessary power to startle. We were soon enough agog at mountainsides brushed in forests and lordly rivers cutting through primordial lands, seemingly plucked straight from the text.

While Jackson's films are of a piece, you can trace visual distinctions. *Fellowship* comes coated in a wondrous texture, a mix of genteel pastoral (the Shire), labyrinthine dungeon patrolled by Dantean beasties (Moria), and the ethereal, hippy-dippy elvish super-nature (Rivendell, Lothlórien). *Towers* utilises natural light across the landscape's raw flesh, to provide a grittier pall (akin to John Ford's great expanses). And it is in *Return* that Tolkien's life-scarring experiences on the Somme are given an eerie afterlife — in Mordor's hellish



**"FOR ALL ITS EPIC STANCHIONS, IT IS THE DETAIL OF RELATIONSHIP THAT STICKS."**



Frodo (Elijah Wood), Gollum (Andy Serkis) and Sam (Sean Astin) pause for breath on their epic journey.

plains and the vastness of the Pelennor Fields. Here, it proved, Jackson was a big director of rare sensitivity, marrying the scenic, vast, eagle-eyed views of Middle-earth's domains with intimate close-ups that take in every crease and tear-rimmed eye of the characters' miens. For all its epic stanchions, it is the detail of relationship that sticks.

Over 12 extended hours, amid the hurly-burly of orc hordes washing over city walls, not to mention the odd balrog, cave troll and giant spideress, there is a wealth of emotional underpinning that is never enslaved by exposition. That takes courage, to afford precious minutes to dally with the base matter of humanity, be it hobbit, elf, dwarf or menfolk.

The casting proved pitch-perfect, the more august actors — Sir Ian McKellen, Sir Ian Holm, Viggo Mortensen, Sir Christopher Lee, Hugo Weaving and Cate Blanchett — helping to fend off absurdity. Loquacious passages from the book, as stiff as carved alabaster, brim with fire on screen. "I am a servant of the Secret Fire, wielder of the flame of Anor..." may sound overblown, but as McKellen blasts it across the darkness of Khazad-Dûm, the air fills with the electrical charge of a *Richard II* or *Henry V*. This is a fairy tale underpinned by theatrical authority.

We can sing of other things (and, indeed, even Aragorn's recourse to dirge can't sink a titanic ship): the effortless chic of Orlando Bloom's Mr Legolas; Howard Shore's stirring blend of fulsome theme and Annie Lennox's warbling; Weta's rapturous CGI; and Andy Serkis' Gollum, that groundbreaking mix of psychological inquiry and technical liberation. There can be a rather pubescent reading of the entire story: the Shire as the idyll of childhood, and the Ring as the power of responsibility forcibly ejecting the childlike hobbits into adulthood. The first place they end up is a pub. There's also something else to keep you pondering, before you race to our Facebook page and chastise us for not moving on — did Frodo actually fail in his quest? After all, at the tipping point, there at the Cracks of Doom, it takes Gollum's deranged intervention to deposit the odious jewellery into the melting pot. If the "ill-favoured" wretch hadn't shown up, would Sam have mustered the wherewithal to shove his bosom buddy over the edge? Now that would be an epic sacrifice.

**IAN NATHAN**

# City Of God

## The kids are not alright

**2002** / CERT **18** / DIRECTORS **FERNANDO MEIRELLES, KÁTIA LUND** / SCREENWRITER **BRÁULIO MANTOVANI** / CAST **ALEXANDRE RODRIGUES, MATHEUS NACHTERGAELE, LEANDRO FIRMINO**

THE NAME RIO de Janeiro invariably conjures postcard images of Sugarloaf mountain and the Christ statue of Corcovado gazing benignly down on the city's sweeping bay and endless stretches of golden sand, teeming with beautiful people sipping pisco sours and playing volley-soccer to a samba beat while the lilting strains of Astrid Gilberto seep from the sound systems. The reality is not so far from the cliché. Rio is, as we all saw during the Olympics, one of the most beguiling cities on Earth. But there is a dark side, and it's Rio's notorious *favela*, Cidade de Deus, light-years from the fleshpots of Ipanema and Copacabana, that is the setting for Meirelles and Lund's film — a film that thunders across the screen, grabbing your attention like a .38 Magnum.

Based on the acclaimed, semi-autobiographical novel by Paulo Lins, *City Of God* spans the years from the late 1960s to the early '80s and the changes wrought on the *favela* and the people who live there. The era was one of tumultuous change for Cidade de Deus, with the escalating spiral of violent crime and dire poverty transforming conditions from harsh to downright hellish.

In essence, *City Of God* is a crime drama that follows a familiar pattern — ghetto kids, drawn into a life of crime, start out small but become ever more ruthless as the years pass, the stakes get higher and friendships and families are ripped apart by the never-ending cycle of murder and retribution. In focusing on the rise to power of drug lord Li'l Zé (Leandro Firmino) and his homeboy Rocket (Alexandre Rodrigues), whose love of photography is, he hopes, his ticket out of the City, it charts the catastrophic effect of the drug trade on Cidade de Deus and the bloody street wars, waged by rival cartels, that it spawned. That's the big picture. What brings it to life



Li'l Dice (Douglas Silva) grabs our attention in *City Of God*.

are the vividly drawn portraits of the people within it.

It would be ridiculous, of course, to assert that any film, no matter how well made or acted, could give you a real sense of what it's like to live in an environment as hostile, chaotic and neglected as Cidade de Deus, but *City Of God* comes as close as you'll ever get. And that is largely down to the efforts of a cast made up not of professional, or even aspiring amateur, actors but of teenagers and young people who grew up in Rio's *favelas*, some of them in Cidade de Deus itself. Meirelles' decision to use non-actors was based on two factors: firstly, there were virtually no professional black actors available. "Today," he said in a 2012 interview, "I can open a casting call and have 500 black actors, but just ten years ago this possibility did not exist. In Brazil there were three or four young black actors." Secondly, he was reluctant to recruit those who were available since they didn't have the life experience he was eager to draw on. In the end, out of a hundred or so chosen, only Matheus Nachtergaele (who plays Carrot) had any background as an actor. Meirelles cast him after seeing him in a play. He was somewhat irked when, before production began, Nachtergaele became a huge star in the 2000 movie *A Dog's Will*.

Rather than introduce his untrained cast to traditional acting techniques, Meirelles ran workshops at which they were encouraged to improvise real-life scenarios: robberies, fights, gun battles and the like. Hailing from some of the meanest streets in South America, they'd probably seen enough of that kind of thing already. Whatever the case, it's the astonishingly natural performances that lend *City Of God* its raw authenticity.

It was not, as is often assumed, shot in Cidade de Deus itself; not even Meirelles was prepared to risk that. It was, however, filmed in a nearby, less dangerous neighbourhood, a fact which, along with its non-professional cast, would more often than not point to an exercise in neo-realism. In fact, it is intensely cinematic, employing hyperactive camera moves, hand-held pans and crash zooms. Machine-gun cutting keeps the narrative hurtling forward with the wild energy of a runaway train. As has been said before, *City Of God* may be hard to watch in places, but it is impossible to take your eyes off it.

In October 2013, the documentary *City Of God — 10 Years Later* premiered at the Rio de Janeiro film festival. Directed by Cavi Borges and Luciano Vidigal, it was made up of background footage from the film and interviews with the cast and crew. Some of them have gone on to great success following *City Of God*'s multi-Oscar-nominated glory. Alice Braga (who plays Angélica) appeared in David Mamet's *Redbelt*, in *I Am Legend* with Will Smith and opposite Matt Damon in *Elysium*. Alexandre Rodrigues has starred in a string of Brazilian TV shows, including *City Of Men*, a spin-off of *City Of God*. Most amazing of all is Seu Jorge (Knockout Ned), best known to non-Latin audiences for his Portuguese-language covers of David Bowie songs in *The Life Aquatic With Steve Zissou*, who now enjoys a stadium-filling musical career.

Others have not been so lucky. Alongside the uplifting rags-to-riches tales are stories of hardship, poverty and a drift back into crime. As for Cidade de Deus, although it is still blighted by the drug trade, conditions have improved markedly, with new emphasis on building infrastructure and improving education. Thanks to the 2010 deployment of a Police Pacification Unit, arrests are up 550 per cent, with homicides down 83 per cent. It even has its own currency, the CDD, which is currently indexed at roughly 20 per cent higher than the Brazilian real. **SIMON BRAUND**

# Oldboy

## Best served cold

**2003** / CERT **18** / DIRECTOR **PARK CHAN-WOOK** / SCREENWRITERS **HWANG JO-YOON, IM JOON-HYEONG, PARK CHAN-WOOK** / CAST **CHOI MIN-SIK, YOO JI-TAE, KANG HYE-JUNG**

CHOI MIN-SIK APOLOGISED to the octopus — two "I'm sorrys" plus a Buddhist prayer. Then he scooped it up and scoffed it. The octopus didn't go down easily: wrecked the scene by sliding up his nostrils. In all, it took four takes and four octopuses to get the shot. *Oldboy*'s most infamous scene is notorious because what you see is real: a man, so starved of life, he devours a living thing, head, beak and tentacle. What, you wonder, was it like eating a panic of living spaghetti? Choi's answer makes you sorry for even asking: "Salty."

"Making an actor suffer," says director Park Chan-wook, "is one of the director's greatest pleasures." Nobody knows this better than Choi. During *Oldboy*'s production, the then-41-year-old was punched in the nose, had his head kicked like a football, gouged himself with needles, lost 9kg in weight and was obliged to eat the world's worst ready-meal, four times. For a film that turns suffering into an art form, Choi's performance flirts with martyrdom but, if you watch *Oldboy*'s epic three-hour making of, the on-set atmosphere was one of intense silence followed by gales of demented laughter. You watch the film in a similar state.

Wedged between *Sympathy For Mr. Vengeance* and *Lady Vengeance*, *Oldboy* is the second entry in Park's Vengeance series, a Korean trilogy of taboo-baiting tragedies, of child-killers and snuff films, united by a primal theme: corrosive, obsessive, soul-chewing revenge. Of the three, *Oldboy* is by far the chewiest.

The set-up is classic pulp. Locked in a cell for 15 maddening years, Oh Dae-su, an ordinary schlub, is released without warning and given five days to discover his tormentor's identity — and why he's being victimised. Burping fire from his new lease of life, Oh dives into an affair with a young sushi chef, tortures his captors and hammers his way to the horrible truth. In a rug-pull worthy of *Seven*, *Oldboy*'s villain, Lee Woo-jin (Yu Ji-tae), reveals himself mid-way, shifting the mystery from a whodunnit to a whydunnit. Unhelpfully, Oh's adversary is also a complete fruitcake. Played with maximum smugness by Yu, Lee's elaborate masterplan is fuelled by a psychotic grudge that's lasted a lifetime.

Introduced in a police station, an absent drunk on his daughter's birthday, Oh appears a fairly harmless buffoon. By the end of the film, his character's so distorted by vengeance, you forget he even had a personality. Oh Dae-su is long gone, replaced by someone, or something else. With wild hair and the tendency to sniff at everything, he rages like a werewolf who can't change back.

*Oldboy* is loosely based on a Japanese manga — very loosely. There's only one death, the villain's plan fails, and its honourable hero is motivated by curiosity rather than blind vengeance. The violence, the body count, the dark laughs, the octopus, the crushing finale, is all from Park. It's an auteur's adaptation, and none more black. Potholing into the darkest depths of human suffering, Park's vision considers freewill, destiny, blood-ties, memory — an extreme Greek tragedy.

*Oldboy*'s other infamous sequence was equally hard on Choi. Oh's hammer assault through a corridor of goons remains one of modern cinema's most subversive action scenes. Instead of a flurry of adrenalin-pumping cuts, Park shot the chaotic brawl in one cold, continuous shot. The side-scrolling effect is weirdly reminiscent of an '80s Sega beat-'em-up. Making violence look that ugly took endless rehearsals. After three days of shooting and 17 punishing takes, Choi was left as battered as calamari.

Despite its psychological horrors, it's a tremendously physical piece. Why? Park claims *Oldboy* is a film about hands which, having previously said his breakthrough movie *JSA: Joint Security Area* was a film about legs, is best taken with a fist of salt. In terms of "meaning", they have as much significance as *Miller's Crossing*'s hats: they're motifs. What Park gives the hands (gripping, hammering, caressing, letting go), is a raw emotional clout, always shot in close-up, given the same expressive weight as the faces. Unusual and bold, but it works.

What's so striking about Park is his vision beyond the screen. Franz Kafka was a huge influence on *Oldboy*'s surreal nightmare (those ants pouring out of Oh's skin are a nod to the novelist's insect-man mash-up, *Metamorphosis*). As is, weirdly, European art — most obviously the Escher-inspired staircases in the film's pivotal flashback.

But the painting. Oh, God, the painting. Hanging in Oh's cell is Man Of Sorrows, a work so queasy you'd get

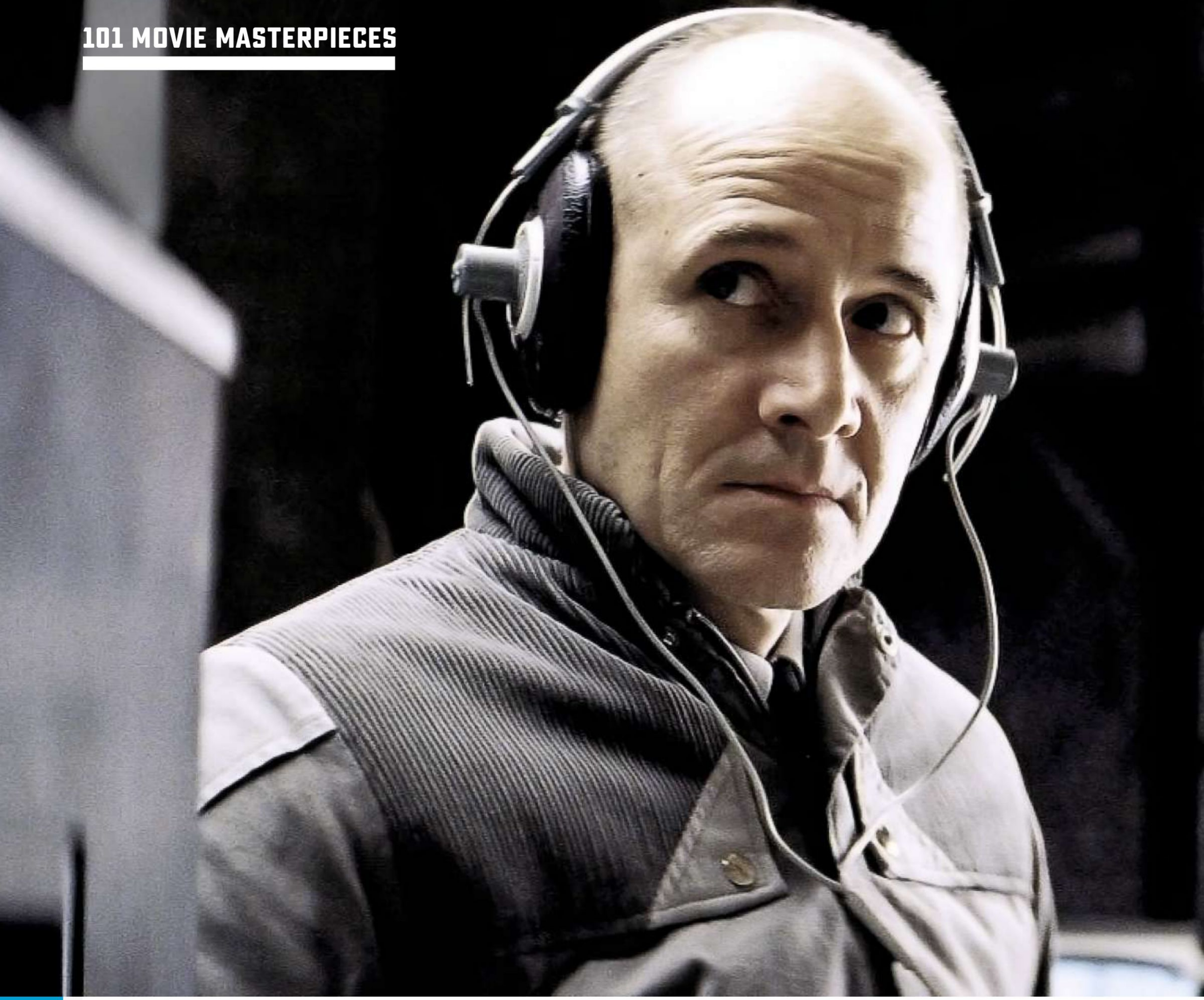


**"WHEN THE CREDITS ROLL YOU'RE LEFT STRANDED, IN AN ABYSS OF UNCERTAINTY."**

**Above:** Dae-su Oh (Min-sik Choi) is in a living hell. **Right:** The tale gets bloodier.

psychological scars after 15 minutes in its company, let alone 15 years. The picture, by Belgian expressionist James Ensor, is a grotesque of Christ, blood pouring, eyes mad, torn grin, teeth bared. It's also placed in Oh's cell at mirror-height — from the very beginning, his fate is staring him in the face. The premonition hits in *Oldboy*'s final, horrifying close-up. There it is: the painting. No longer hung on the cell wall, its expression now smeared onto Oh's face, a contorted mask of suffering, ecstasy and sheer lunacy. Oh's doom, one of the most perverse you can imagine, is handed back to the audience, open-ended and ambiguous: you're left stranded, silent, in an abyss of uncertainty. But then, making an audience suffer is clearly one of Park's greatest pleasures. **SIMON CROOK**





# The Lives Of Others

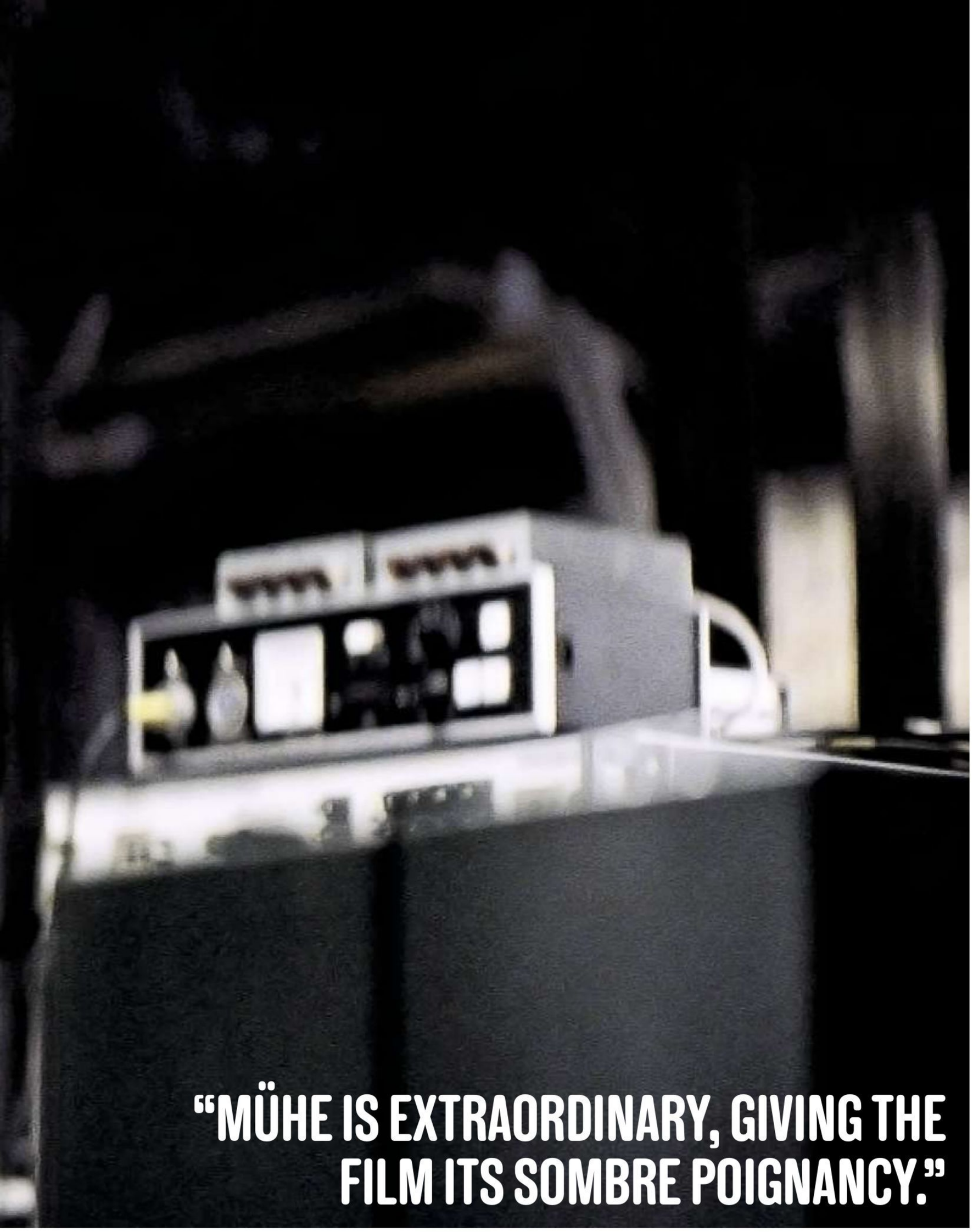
## A bugger's life

**2006** / CERT **15** / DIRECTOR **FLORIAN HENCKEL VON DONNERSMARCK** / SCREENWRITER **FLORIAN HENCKEL VON DONNERSMARCK** / CAST **ULRICH MÜHE, MARTINA GEDECK, SEBASTIAN KOCH**

IN COMMUNIST-ERA EAST Germany, the Stasi, the state's internal security force, demanded that all privately owned typewriters be officially registered, such was their fear of anyone pecking out sedition under the cloak of anonymity. It's a succinct illustration of how paranoid the authorities were, particularly when it came to artists and the power of the written word. It also provides a key plot point in writer-director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's debut, a quietly devastating thriller that explores the role of art in a brutally repressive society.

Set in 1984, it begins with Stasi captain Gerd Wiesler (Ulrich Mühe) lecturing a class of new recruits on the finer points of interrogation. The sanitised, bright classroom is intercut with scenes of Wiesler dispassionately grilling a suspect who, under intolerable pressure, eventually breaks down and informs on a neighbour. There are no spy-movie embellishments here, just Wiesler calmly, relentlessly asking the same question until his victim finally cracks.

At the end of the demonstration, Wiesler receives a round of applause that he barely acknowledges. Here, we can see, is a true believer, an implacable instrument of the state whose sole purpose in life is to root out and eliminate the enemies of socialism. For all that, Wiesler is a rationalist and he is initially puzzled when he is assigned to bug the apartment of prominent playwright Georg Dreyman (Sebastian Koch) and




Ulrich Mühe as sympathetic Stasi Gerd Wielser in *The Lives Of Others*.

his lover, actress Christa-Maria Sieland (Martina Gedeck), who are, in his estimation, entirely loyal to the state.

As he sits alone in a room, monitoring the routine goings-on in Georg and Christa's apartment, his initial contempt for their decadent lifestyle turns gradually to fascination. And when he discovers that the operation has less to do with national security and far more with a sleazy government minister's sexual obsession with Christa-Maria, he is moved to compassion. What sparks a flame of humanity in Wiesler's icy heart is his tapping into an unknown world, of poetry and music and beauty. There is a wonderful scene — a turning point in the film — where Wiesler snoops around Dreyman's flat. It is full of wonders: books, records, paintings, things that have barely impinged on his consciousness before. Later, Dreyman searches for a cherished volume of Bertolt Brecht. We cut to Wiesler, lying on the couch in his own austere apartment, engrossed in the book, clearly enraptured by Brecht's poem *Remembering Marie A*. When Dreyman decides to take a stance against government repression by writing a subversive piece for a West German magazine (hence the necessity for a smuggled-in, non-registered typewriter), Wiesler risks his own safety by falsifying his reports to protect him.

Von Donnersmarck received no little criticism, particularly from those who had lived in fear of the Stasi, for making one of their number a hero. Hubertus Knabe, director of the Hohenschönhausen prison memorial, refused von Donnersmarck permission to film there. Von Donnersmarck responded that *Schindler's List* had set a precedent and that the events depicted in *The Lives Of Others* were plausible. “But that is exactly the difference,” countered Knabe. “There was a Schindler. There was no Wiesel.”

He has a point, and it would be insensitive to minimise criticism of the film by people who experienced the realities of life in the GDR. Still, aside from Wiesel's actions, the film paints an unsparing portrait of the Stasi as ruthless, corrupt and self-serving. Von Donnersmarck also received fulsome praise from ex-residents of the GDR for his uncannily accurate evocation of the era (all the surveillance equipment used in the film, for instance, was original Stasi-issue, donated by museums and collectors. Props master Olaf Kronenthal spent two years in a Stasi prison and insisted on absolute authenticity).

Von Donnersmarck was born into the aristocratic Henckel von Donnersmarck family (his mother is a direct descendant of General von Blücher, Prince of Wahlstatt, chief ally of the Duke Of Wellington at Waterloo) and spent time in East Germany as a child. He well remembers, he says, the pervasive mood of fear that existed in the 1980s. The idea for *The Lives Of Others* came to him while listening to music and recalling Lenin's feelings about the Beethoven sonata Appassionata. It was so beautiful, the Communist leader told novelist Maxim Gorky, that he abstained from listening to it lest it soften his revolutionary zeal. “I suddenly had this image of a person sitting in a depressing room with earphones on,” von Donnersmarck told *The New York Times*. “[*He is*] listening in to what he supposes is the enemy of the state, and what he is really hearing is beautiful music that touches him.”

Mühe, who died a year after the film was released and whose extraordinary performance gives *The Lives Of Others* its sombre poignancy, had a closer relationship to the former GDR than von Donnersmarck. He grew up in East Berlin and was a star of the city's Deutsches Theater company. Following unification in 1989 he, like Wiesel in the film, looked up his official Stasi file. He was shocked and dismayed to discover that several fellow actors at the Deutsches Theater had informed on him. He also claimed that his second wife, Jenny Gröllmann, had been a Stasi collaborator. When asked how he prepared for his role in *The Lives Of Others* he replied, simply, “I remembered.” **SIMON BRAUND**

The demonic Pale Man (Doug Jones, who also plays Fauno) is the stuff of nightmares in Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth.*

# Pan's Labyrinth

## Dark universe



**2006** / CERT **15** / DIRECTOR **GUILLERMO DEL TORO** / SCREENWRITER **GUILLERMO DEL TORO** / CAST **IVANA BAQUERO, ARIADNA GIL, SERGI LÓPEZ**

IT FOLLOWS THAT archetypal characters should share archetypal speech. "You have chosen wisely," the Grail Knight informs Indy upon his cup selection in *The Last Crusade*. "And you chose well, Your Highness," the faun tells Ofelia (Ivana Baquero) upon her red-shoed return to her underworld home in *Pan's Labyrinth*. The threshold guardians in both are pleased that their seekers sought well. There are fascists in each film, meanwhile, and they choose poorly. They turn to dust in the human realm.

It could not be any other way, of course. The fascist is not a happy traveller in the realm of myth — staying with Indy, remember the face-melting pandemonium at the breaching of the legendary Ark? In *Pan's*, Sergi López' Captain Vidal cannot see the faun (Doug Jones) with whom Ofelia converses. He has no understanding of such matters.

The secret to appreciating and surviving fairy-tale adventures is often revealed through instinct and integrity, compassion and kindness, even if the correct choices demand disobedience. But compassion, and especially disobedience, are anathema to the fascist. Consider the fate of Dr Ferreiro (Álex Angulo) in *Pan's* when his kindness leads to defiance of Vidal: 14 steps taken, a free man at last, but then a bullet in the back. In the mind of the fascist, disobedience is not an option — indeed, the smashing of the peasant's face with the wine bottle, the film's most shocking act of violence, is inspired by a tale Guillermo del Toro heard of a fascist officer pistol-whipping a man in a store for failing to take off his hat. For Ofelia, however, disobedience is an immutable truth. It's one of *Pan's* fundamental themes and it ensures that this dark, melancholy and romantic picture resonates across the globe.

In truth, the reasons for *Pan's* popularity are as plentiful as the interpretations the film invites. Like all good fairy stories, this tale trades in archetypes: del Toro deconstructs the classic fairy-tale structure and rebuilds it within a more complex edifice, and yet, the primal protagonist and antagonist remain uncorrupted. Here we have Ofelia, a latter-day Red Riding Hood, in conflict with Vidal, the big, bad and (in this case) fastidiously manicured wolf.

Del Toro tends not to conform to Hollywood convention when crafting his Spanish-language pictures, but much of the power that drives the narrative does come via the simple storytelling thesis that says both protagonist and antagonist should share the same goal.

This is not at first apparent. Sure, both Ofelia and Vidal want Carmen (Ariadna Gil), the mother, but while Ofelia cherishes her, Vidal, as a misogynistic patriarch, only covets the contents of her pregnant belly. Upon her arrival at the forest mill happily he volunteers to sleep in his study. (Like many men in folktales he fears woman as castrator, a fate that comes to pass, metaphorically, when the housekeeper Mercedes [Maribel Verdú] slices her knife through his cheek, neutering his vanity.)

Later on, at the film's denouement, both characters seek possession of the infant, but this is a detail within the broader construct. No, the real treasure over which Ofelia and Vidal tussle is a yet loftier prize — immortality — though neither articulates their desire directly and the reasons they'd possess it stand in stark contrast. For Ofelia it is the consequence of fulfilling her destiny and returning to her true home in the otherworld. For sociopathic Vidal, however, it is the highest point of his egotism. He wants to be remembered, like his father before him. "Tell my son the time that his father died," he says to the rebels who've gathered to kill him. When Mercedes replies that his son will not even know his name, Vidal crumples, dead before the bullet hits his face.

As a master storyteller, del Toro has left his trail of breadcrumbs — the notion of immortality appears early in the movie when Ofelia lies in bed with her mother, who encourages her daughter to tell a story to the unborn in the womb. And so begins Ofelia's romance of the rose, where the blue-black flower sits atop a mountain beset by poisonous thorns, and though it offers its retriever the gift of eternal life, the path is too precarious. "Men talked among themselves about their fear of death and pain," her story concludes, "but never about the promise of eternal life."

Intuitively, Ofelia knows better, and when she makes her final choice in the labyrinth, she goes on to accept death willingly. She knows what waits if she declines entry to the otherworld, but still she refuses to surrender the child. This moment marks the route to immortality — literally, as her innocent blood, rather than her brother's, opens the portal that will carry her home, and metaphorically for both Ofelia and the viewer; conquer the fear of death, says del Toro's film, and we will be immortal.

There is much more to this wonderful picture, and like any tale dealing in archetypes, it presents different emphases to different viewers. One wonders at the readings that would have arisen from del Toro's original vision for the film, which placed an adult at the centre of the narrative, a woman who falls in love with a faun and in the labyrinth's heart hands over to him her newborn child. It would no doubt have proved a profound and moving picture, but it would not have been this story, this wise and romantic tale about a girl and her terrifying, thorn-pricked path to eternal life. This is an important theme in a masterful film. Del Toro chose wisely. **WILL LAWRENCE**

# The Checklist

## How many of the 101 Movie Masterpieces have you seen?

- ☐ 8 1/2
- ☐ 12 Angry Men
- ☐ The 39 Steps
- ☐ Alien
- ☐ All About Eve
- ☐ All The President's Men
- ☐ American Psycho
- ☐ The Apartment
- ☐ Back To The Future
- ☐ Badlands
- ☐ The Before Trilogy
- ☐ Bicycle Thieves
- ☐ The Big Sleep
- ☐ Big Wednesday
- ☐ The Birds
- ☐ The Blair Witch Project
- ☐ Bonnie And Clyde
- ☐ Cabaret
- ☐ The Cabinet Of Dr. Caligari
- ☐ Chinatown
- ☐ Citizen Kane
- ☐ City Of God
- ☐ A Clockwork Orange
- ☐ The Cook, The Thief, His Wife And Her Lover
- ☐ The Court Jester
- ☐ Das Boot
- ☐ Die Hard
- ☐ The Dirty Dozen
- ☐ Do The Right Thing
- ☐ Don't Look Now
- ☐ Double Indemnity
- ☐ Dr. Strangelove Or: How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Love the Bomb
- ☐ E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial
- ☐ Eraserhead
- ☐ Fargo
- ☐ Fitzcarraldo
- ☐ The Fly
- ☐ Forbidden Planet
- ☐ The French Connection
- ☐ Glengarry Glen Ross
- ☐ The Good, The Bad And The Ugly
- ☐ GoodFellas
- ☐ The Graduate
- ☐ Groundhog Day
- ☐ Intolerance
- ☐ JFK
- ☐ Kiss Me Deadly
- ☐ L.A. Confidential
- ☐ The Lives Of Others
- ☐ Lost Horizon
- ☐ The Lord Of The Rings Trilogy
- ☐ M
- ☐ Magnolia
- ☐ Manhattan
- ☐ My Brilliant Career
- ☐ Nashville
- ☐ Network
- ☐ McCabe And Mrs. Miller
- ☐ The Night Of The Hunter
- ☐ Oldboy
- ☐ On The Waterfront
- ☐ Once Upon A Time In The West
- ☐ One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest
- ☐ Pan's Labyrinth
- ☐ Platoon
- ☐ Pulp Fiction
- ☐ Rear Window
- ☐ Red River
- ☐ Rififi
- ☐ Rio Bravo
- ☐ Rocky
- ☐ Rosemary's Baby
- ☐ Scarface
- ☐ Scream
- ☐ Seven
- ☐ Sex, Lies, And Videotape
- ☐ Solaris
- ☐ Some Like It Hot
- ☐ Spartacus
- ☐ Stagecoach
- ☐ Stalag 17
- ☐ Star Wars: Episode V The Empire Strikes Back
- ☐ Sunset Boulevard
- ☐ Suspiria
- ☐ Sweet Smell Of Success
- ☐ Terminator 2: Judgment Day
- ☐ The Texas Chain Saw Massacre
- ☐ The Thief Of Bagdad
- ☐ Throne Of Blood
- ☐ To Kill A Mockingbird
- ☐ Top Hat
- ☐ Topsy-Turvy
- ☐ Toy Story
- ☐ The Treasure Of The Sierra Madre
- ☐ The Truman Show
- ☐ Vertigo
- ☐ The Wages Of Fear
- ☐ When Harry Met Sally
- ☐ The Wild Bunch
- ☐ Witness
- ☐ The Wizard Of Oz

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